



# Realism Reader

Edited by  
Colin Elman and Michael A. Jensen

# Realism Reader

The *Realism Reader* provides broad coverage of a centrally important tradition in the study of foreign policy and international politics. After some years in the doldrums, political realism is again in contention as a leading tradition in the international relations subfield.

Divided into three main sections, the book covers seven different and distinctive approaches within the realist tradition: classical realism, balance of power theory, neorealism, defensive structural realism, offensive structural realism, rise and fall realism, and neoclassical realism. The middle section of the volume covers realism's contributions on critiques leveled by liberalism, institutionalism, and constructivism and the English School. The final section of the book provides materials on realism's engagement with some contemporary issues in international politics, with collections on United States (U.S.) hegemony, European cooperation, and whether future threats will arise from non-state actors or the rise of competing great powers.

The book offers a logically coherent and manageable framework for organizing the realist canon, and provides exemplary literature in each of the traditions and dialogues that are included in the volume. The *Realism Reader* provides a "one-stop-shop" for undergraduates and masters students taking a course in contemporary international relations theory, with a particular focus on realism.

**Colin Elman** is Associate Professor of Political Science at Syracuse University. He has published articles in *International Organization*, *International Studies Quarterly*, the *International History Review*, the *American Political Science Review*, *International Security*, and *Security Studies*. He is co-founder and Secretary-Treasurer of both the International History and Politics, and Qualitative and Multi-Method Research organized sections of the American Political Science Association, and co-founder and Executive Director of the Consortium for Qualitative Research Methods.

**Michael A. Jensen** is a Faculty Research Associate at the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland, where he serves as the Data Collection Manager for the Global Terrorism Database. He also currently teaches courses on international security and terrorism for the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University and the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Maryland. Prior to joining START, he was a post-doctoral fellow at the Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs, Syracuse University.

This page intentionally left blank

# **Realism Reader**

**Edited by Colin Elman and Michael A. Jensen**

First published 2014  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

© 2014 Colin Elman and Michael A. Jensen, selection and editorial matter;  
contributors their contributions.

The right of Colin Elman and Michael A. Jensen to be identified as editors of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patent Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

*Trademark notice:* Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Realism reader / edited by Colin Elman and Michael Jensen. — First edition  
pages cm

Summary: "The Realism Reader provides broad coverage of a centrally important tradition in the study of foreign policy and international politics" — Provided by publisher.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Realism—Political aspects. 2. International relations—Philosophy.  
3. World politics. I. Elman, Colin. II. Jensen, Michael.

JZ1307.R43 2011

327.101—dc23

2013021658

ISBN: 978-0-415-77354-6 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-415-77357-7 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-85857-9 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman

by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
<b>1 Introduction</b>	1
<b>SECTION ONE</b>	
<b>Realist research programs</b>	31
<b>2 Classical realism: The twentieth century</b>	33
The beginnings of a science	35
EDWARD HALLETT CARR	
The realist critique	39
EDWARD HALLETT CARR	
The moral blindness of scientific man	47
HANS J. MORGENTHAU	
A realist theory of international politics	53
HANS J. MORGENTHAU	
Idealist internationalism and the security dilemma	60
JOHN H. HERZ	
The pole of power and the pole of indifference	62
ARNOLD WOLFERS	
<b>3 Balance of power theory</b>	74
The balance of power: prescription, concept, or propaganda?	76
ERNST B. HAAS	
Aims	81
EDWARD VOSE GULICK	
Feedback	86
ROBERT JERVIS	

vi *Contents*

Balancing on land and at sea: do states ally against the leading global power?	93
JACK S. LEVY AND WILLIAM R. THOMPSON	
<b>4 Neorealism</b>	101
Political structures	103
KENNETH N. WALTZ	
Anarchic orders and balances of power	113
KENNETH N. WALTZ	
Realist thought and neorealist theory	124
KENNETH N. WALTZ	
The origins of war in neorealist theory	129
KENNETH N. WALTZ	
<b>5 Defensive structural realism</b>	134
Cooperation under the security dilemma	136
ROBERT JERVIS	
Alliance formation and the balance of world power	145
STEPHEN M. WALT	
Introduction	150
STEPHEN VAN EVERA	
Realists as optimists: cooperation as self-help	157
CHARLES L. GLASER	
Breaking out of the security dilemma: realism, reassurance, and the problem of uncertainty	167
EVAN BRADEN MONTGOMERY	
<b>6 Offensive structural realism</b>	177
Anarchy and the struggle for power	179
JOHN J. MEARSHEIMER	
Mearsheimer's world: offensive realism and the struggle for security	188
GLENN H. SNYDER	
The "poster child for offensive realism": America as a global hegemon	197
CHRISTOPHER LAYNE	
<b>7 Rise and fall realism</b>	205
Power transition	207
A.F.K. ORGANSKI	

The power transition research program: A Lakatosian analysis	211
JONATHAN M. DICICCO AND JACK S. LEVY	
The nature of international political change	218
ROBERT GILPIN	
Hegemonic war and international change	221
ROBERT GILPIN	
Declining power and the preventive motivation for war	226
JACK S. LEVY	
Neorealism and the myth of bipolar stability: toward a new dynamic realist theory of major war	234
DALE C. COPELAND	
<b>8 Neoclassical realism</b>	243
The necessary and natural evolution of structural realism	245
CHARLES L. GLASER	
Introduction: neoclassical realism, the state, and foreign policy	253
JEFFREY W. TALIAFERRO, STEVEN E. LOBELL, AND NORRIN M. RIPSAN	
Chain gangs and passed bucks: predicting alliance patterns in multipolarity	259
THOMAS J. CHRISTENSEN AND JACK SNYDER	
Unanswered threats: a neoclassical realist theory of underbalancing	265
RANDALL L. SCHWELLER	
Neoclassical realism and the national interest: presidents, domestic politics, and major military interventions	272
COLIN DUECK	
<b>SECTION TWO</b>	
<b>Critiques and responses</b>	275
<b>9 Engaging liberal critiques</b>	277
Taking preferences seriously: a liberal theory of international politics	279
ANDREW MORAVCSIK	
Is anybody not an (international relations) liberal?	287
BRIAN C. RATHBUN	
How liberalism produces democratic peace	292
JOHN M. OWEN	
Kant or cant: the myth of the democratic peace	301
CHRISTOPHER LAYNE	



<b>10 Engaging the institutionalist critiques</b>	311
Neoliberalism, neorealism, and world politics	313
DAVID A. BALDWIN	
Institutional theory as a research program	320
ROBERT O. KEOHANE AND LISA L. MARTIN	
Anarchy and the limits of cooperation: a realist critique of the newest liberal institutionalism	325
JOSEPH M. GRIECO	
The false promise of international institutions	330
JOHN J. MEARSHEIMER	
<b>11 Engaging the constructivist and English School critiques</b>	342
Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics	344
ALEXANDER WENDT	
Culture clash: assessing the importance of ideas in security studies	353
MICHAEL C. DESCH	
The English School <i>vs.</i> American realism: a meeting of minds or divided by a common language?	361
RICHARD LITTLE	
A realist critique of the English School	370
DALE C. COPELAND	
<b>SECTION THREE</b>	
<b>Realist theories and contemporary international politics</b>	379
<b>12 Realism, American hegemony, and soft balancing</b>	381
The stability of a unipolar world	383
WILLIAM C. WOHLFORTH	
The unipolar illusion revisited: the coming end of the United States' unipolar moment	396
CHRISTOPHER LAYNE	
Soft balancing against the United States	406
ROBERT A. PAPE	
Waiting for balancing: why the world is not pushing back	414
KEIR A. LIEBER AND GERARD ALEXANDER	

<b>13 Realism and European cooperation</b>	422
The future of the American pacifier	424
JOHN J. MEARSHEIMER	
European Union security and defense policy: response to unipolarity?	430
BARRY R. POSEN	
Still not pushing back: why the European Union is not balancing the United States	440
JOLYON HOWORTH AND ANAND MENON	
<b>14 Realism, non-state actors, and the rise of China</b>	450
Structural realism in a more complex world	452
CHARLES L. GLASER	
The security dilemma and ethnic conflict	455
BARRY R. POSEN	
China's unpeaceful rise	464
JOHN J. MEARSHEIMER	
The tragedy of offensive realism: classical realism and the rise of China	468
JONATHAN KIRSHNER	
<b>15 Is realism heading in the right direction?</b>	481
The realist paradigm and degenerative versus progressive research programs: an appraisal of neotraditional research on Waltz's balancing proposition	483
JOHN A. VASQUEZ	
Evaluating theories	493
KENNETH N. WALTZ	
The progressive power of realism	500
STEPHEN M. WALT	
Is anybody still a realist?	505
JEFFREY W. LEGRO AND ANDREW MORAVCSIK	
Correspondence: brother, can you spare a paradigm?	518
PETER D. FEAVER, GUNTHER HELLMAN, RANDALL L. SCHWELLER, JEFFREY W. TALIAFERRO, WILLIAM C. WOHLFORTH, JEFFREY W. LEGRO, AND ANDREW MORAVCSIK	
<i>Index</i>	524

# Acknowledgements

The publishers would like to thank the following for permission to reprint their material:

## Chapter 2

Palgrave for permission to reprint Edward Hallett Carr, “The Beginnings of a Science” and “The Realist Critique” from *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper, 1964; reprinted Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 1–10, 63–88.

University of Chicago Press for permission to reprint Hans J. Morgenthau, “The Moral Blindness of Scientific Man” from *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1946), 191–203. Reprinted with permission.

The McGraw-Hill Companies for permission to reprint Hans J. Morgenthau, “A Realist Theory of International Politics” from *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6th edition (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 1985), 3–17, 187–96, 223–31. Reproduced with permission of the McGraw-Hill Companies.

John H. Herz, “Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 2 (January 1950): 157–9. © Trustees of Princeton University, published by Cambridge University Press, reproduced with permission.

Arnold Wolfers, “The Pole of Power and the Pole of Indifference,” *World Politics* 4 (October 1951): 39–63. © Trustees of Princeton University, published by Cambridge University Press, reproduced with permission.

## Chapter 3

Cambridge University Press for permission to reprint Ernst B. Haas, “The Balance of Power: Prescription, Concept, or Propaganda,” *World Politics* 5, no. 4 (July 1953): 442–77. © Trustees of Princeton University, published by Cambridge University Press, reproduced with permission.

Cornell University Press for permission to reprint material from Edward Vose Gulick, *Europe’s Classical Balance of Power*. © 1955 American Historical Association. Copyright renewed in 1983 by E. V. Gulick. Used by permission of the publisher, Cornell University Press.

Princeton University Press for permission to reprint JERVIS, ROBERT: SYSTEM EFFECTS. © 1997 Princeton University Press. Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press.

MIT Press Journals for permission to reprint Jack S. Levy, William R. Thompson, “Balancing on Land and at Sea: Do States Ally against the Leading Global Power?,” *International Security*, 35:1 (Summer, 2010): 7–43. © 2010 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

## Chapter 4

The McGraw-Hill Companies for permission to reprint Kenneth Waltz, “Political Structures” and “Anarchic Orders and Balances of Power” from *Theory of International Politics*. Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 1979, chs. 5–6. Reproduced with permission of the McGraw-Hill Companies

*Journal of International Affairs* for permission to reprint Kenneth Waltz, “Realist Thought and Neorealist Theory,” *Journal of International Affairs* 44, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1990): 21–37. © 1990 by JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS. Reproduced with permission of JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS in the format Other book via Copyright Clearance Center.

Reprinted from *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XVIII (1988): 615–28, with the permission of the editors of *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* and The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts. © 1988 by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and The Journal of Interdisciplinary History, Inc.

## Chapter 5

Cambridge University Press and the author for permission to reprint Robert Jervis, “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978): 167–214. © Trustees of Princeton University, published by Cambridge University Press, reproduced with permission.

MIT Press Journals for permission to reprint Stephen M. Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of Power,” *International Security* 9:4 (Spring 1985): 3–43. © 1985 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. (excerpts)

Reprinted from Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict*. Copyright © 1999 by Cornell University. Used by permission of the publisher, Cornell University Press.

MIT Press Journals for permission to reprint Charles L. Glaser, “Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help,” *International Security* 19:3 (Winter, 1994/95): 50–90. © 1995 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. (excerpts)

MIT Press Journals for permission to reprint Evan Braden Montgomery, “Breaking Out of the Security Dilemma: Realism, Reassurance, and the Problem of Uncertainty,” *International*

*Security* 31:2 (Fall 2006): 151–85. © 2006 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

## Chapter 6

From THE TRAGEDY OF GREAT POWER POLITICS by John J. Mearsheimer. Copyright © 2001 by John J. Mearsheimer. Used by permission of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

MIT Press Journals for permission to reprint Glenn H. Snyder, “Mearsheimer’s World—Offensive Realism and the Struggle for Security: A Review Essay”, *International Security* 27:1 (Summer 2002): 149–73. © 2002 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. (excerpts)

Taylor & Francis Ltd for permission to reprint Christopher Layne, “The ‘Poster Child for Offensive Realism’: America as a Global Hegemon,” *Security Studies* 12(2) (Winter 2002/3): 120–64. © Routledge 2002. Reprinted by permission of the publisher (Taylor & Francis Ltd, <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals>).

## Chapter 7

Cengage / Nelson for permission to reprint A.F.K. Organski, “Power Transition” (volume 12 of the 1968 edition of the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 2nd edition, edited by William Darity. 780028659657 (0028659651), Gale (Year: 2007): pp. 415–17).

Elman, Colin, and Miriam Fendius Elman, eds. foreword by Kenneth N. Waltz, *Progress in International Relations Theory: Appraising the Field*, pp. 109–57. © 2003 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, by permission of The MIT Press.

Robert Gilpin, “The Nature of International Political Change” and “Hegemonic War and International Change” from *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), chs. 1 & 5.

Cambridge University Press and the author for permission to reprint Jack Levy, “Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War,” *World Politics* 40(1) (1987): 82–107. © Trustees of Princeton University, published by Cambridge University Press, reproduced with permission.

Taylor & Francis Ltd for permission to reprint Dale Copeland, “Neorealism and the Myth of Bipolar Stability: Toward a New Dynamic Realist Theory of Major War,” *Security Studies* 5:3 (Spring 1996): 29–89. Copyright © Routledge 1996. Reprinted by permission of the publisher (Taylor & Francis Ltd, <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals>).

## Chapter 8

Pearson for permission to reprint Charles Glaser, “The Necessary and Natural Evolution of Structural Realism.” From REALISM AND THE BALANCING OF POWER by John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman. Excerpts pp. 266–73, and 275–6. Copyright © 2003 by Pearson Education, Inc. Reprinted by permission.

Cambridge University Press and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro and Steven E. Lobell for permission to reprint Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, Steven E. Lobell, and Norrin M. Ripsman, "Introduction: Neoclassical Realism, The State, and Foreign Policy," in *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*, Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey Taliaferro, eds. © Cambridge University Press, 2009, reproduced with permission.

MIT Press Journals for permission to reprint Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity," *International Organization* 44:2 (Spring 1990): 137–68. © 1990 by the World Peace Foundation and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. (excerpts)

MIT Press Journals for permission to reprint Randall L. Schweller, "Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing," *International Security* 29:2 (Fall 2004): 159–201. © 2004 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. (excerpts)

Cambridge University Press and the author for permission to reprint Colin Dueck "Neoclassical Realism and the National Interest: Presidents, Domestic Politics, and Major Military Interventions," in *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*, Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey Taliaferro, eds. © Cambridge University Press, 2009, reproduced with permission.

## **Chapter 9**

MIT Press Journals for permission to reprint Andrew Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics," *International Organization* 51:4 (Autumn 1997): 513–53. © 1997 by the IO Foundation and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Taylor & Francis Ltd for permission to reprint Brian C. Rathbun, "Is Anybody Not an (International Relations) Liberal?" *Security Studies* 19:1 (2010): 2–25. © Routledge 2009. Reprinted by permission of the publisher (Taylor & Francis Ltd, <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals>).

MIT Press Journals for permission to reprint John M. Owen, "How Liberalism Produces Democratic Peace," *International Security* 19:2 (Fall 1994): 87–125. © 1994 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. (excerpts)

MIT Press Journals for permission to reprint Christopher Layne, "Kant or Cant: The Myth of the Democratic Peace," *International Security* 19:2 (Fall 1994): 5–49. © 1994 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. (excerpts)

## **Chapter 10**

Columbia University Press for permission to reprint from "Neoliberalism, Neorealism, and World Politics," in David A. Baldwin, ed., *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate*. © 1993, Columbia University Press, 1993. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

MIT Press for permission to reprint Elman, Colin, and Miriam Fendius Elman, eds. foreword by Kenneth N. Waltz., *Progress in International Relations Theory: Appraising the Field*, excerpt from pp. 73–82. © 2003 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, by permission of The MIT Press.

MIT Press Journals for permission to reprint Joseph M. Grieco, “Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism,” *International Organization* 42:3 (Summer 1988): 485–507. © 1988 by the World Peace Foundation and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

MIT Press Journals for permission to reprint John Mearsheimer, “The False Promise of International Institutions,” *International Security* 19:3 (Winter 1994): 5–49. © 1995 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. (excerpts)

## **Chapter 11**

MIT Press Journals for permission to reprint Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics,” *International Organization* 46:2 (Spring 1992): 391–425. © 1992 by the World Peace Foundation and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. (excerpts)

MIT Press Journals for permission to reprint Michael C. Desch, “Culture Clash: Assessing the Importance of Ideas in Security Studies,” *International Security* 23:1 (Summer 1998): 141–70. © 1998 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. (excerpts)

Cambridge University Press and the author for permission to reprint Richard Little, “The English School vs. American Realism: A Meeting of Minds or Divided by a Common Language?” *Review of International Studies* 29 (2003): 443–60. © British International Studies Association, published by Cambridge University Press, reproduced with permission.

Cambridge University Press and the author for permission to reprint Dale Copeland, “A Realist Critique of the English School,” *Review of International Studies* 29 (2003): 427–41. © British International Studies Association, published by Cambridge University Press, reproduced with permission.

## **Chapter 12**

MIT Press Journals for permission to reprint William C. Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” *International Security* 24:1 (Summer 1999): 5–41. © 1999 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. (excerpts)

MIT Press Journals for permission to reprint Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion Revisited: The Coming End of the United States’ Unipolar Moment,” *International Security* 31:2 (Fall 2006): 7–41. © 2006 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

MIT Press Journals for permission to reprint Robert A. Pape, "Soft Balancing against the United States," *International Security* 30:1 (Summer 2005): 7–45. © 2005 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. (excerpts)

MIT Press Journals for permission to reprint Keir A. Lieber and Gerard Alexander, "Waiting for Balancing: Why the World is Not Pushing Back," *International Security* 30:1 (Summer 2005): 109–39. © 2005 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. (excerpts)

## Chapter 13

John Mearsheimer for permission to reprint "The Future of the American Pacifier," *Foreign Affairs* 80:5 (September/October 2001): 46–61.

Taylor & Francis for permission to reprint Barry R. Posen, "European Union Security and Defense Policy: Response to Unipolarity?" *Security Studies* 15:2 (June 2006): 149–86. © Routledge 2006. Reprinted by permission of the publisher (Taylor & Francis Ltd, <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals>).

Sage Publications for permission to reprint Jolyon Howorth and Anand Menon, "Still Not Pushing Back: Why the European Union is Not Balancing the United States," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53:5 (October 2009): 727–44. © 2009 Sage Publications. Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications.

## Chapter 14

Cambridge University Press and the author for permission to reprint Charles L. Glaser, "Structural Realism in a More Complex World," *Review of International Studies* 29 (2003). © British International Studies Association, published by Cambridge University Press.

Routledge for permission to reprint Barry R. Posen, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict," *Survival* 35:1 (Spring 1993): 27–47. © 1993 Routledge.

*Current History* and the author for permission to reprint John J. Mearsheimer, "China's Unpeaceful Rise." Reprinted with permission from *Current History* magazine 105:690 (April 2006). © 2006 Current History, Inc.

Sage Publications for permission to reprint Jonathan Kirshner, "The Tragedy of Offensive Realism: Classical Realism and the Rise of China," *European Journal of International Relations* 18, no. 1 (March 2012): 53–75.. © 2010, European Consortium for Political Research, SAGE Publications. Reprinted by Permission of SAGE.

## Chapter 15

Cambridge University Press and the author for permission to reprint John A. Vasquez, "The Realist Paradigm and Degenerative versus Progressive Research Programs: An Appraisal of Neotraditional Research on Waltz's Balancing Proposition," *American Political Science*



*Review* 91:4 (December 1997): 899–912. © American Political Science Association, published by Cambridge University Press, reproduced with permission.

Cambridge University Press and the author for permission to reprint Kenneth N. Waltz, “Evaluating Theories,” *American Political Science Review* 91:4 (December 1997): 913–17. © American Political Science Association, published by Cambridge University Press, reproduced with permission.

Cambridge University Press and the author for permission to reprint Stephen M. Walt, “The Progressive Power of Realism,” *American Political Science Review* 91:4 (December 1997): 931–5. © American Political Science Association, published by Cambridge University Press, reproduced with permission.

MIT Press Journals for permission to reprint Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, “Is Anybody Still a Realist?” *International Security* 24:2 (Fall 1999): 5–55. © 1999 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. (excerpts)

MIT Press Journals for permission to reprint Peter D. Feaver, Gunther Hellman, Randall L. Schweller, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, William C. Wohlforth, Jeffrey W. Legro, and Andrew Moravcsik, “Correspondence: Brother, Can You Spare a Paradigm? (Or Was Anybody Ever a Realist?),” *International Security* 25:1 (Summer 2000): 165–93. © 2000 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

## **Disclaimer**

The publishers have made every effort to contact authors/copyright holders of works reprinted in the *Realism Reader* and to obtain permission to publish extracts. This has not been possible in every case, however, and we would welcome correspondence from those individuals/companies whom we have been unable to trace. Any omissions brought to our attention will be remedied in future editions.

# 1 Introduction

The *Realism Reader* provides broad coverage of a centrally important tradition in the study of foreign policy and international politics. After some years in the doldrums, political realism is again in contention as a leading tradition in the international relations sub-field. Realism's return has been accompanied by the continuing development of several distinct variants within the tradition.

This chapter provides an introductory overview of the *Realism Reader*, describes the realist research tradition, and explains the organization of the volume.<sup>1</sup> The book offers a logically coherent and manageable framework for organizing the realist canon, and provides exemplary literature in each of the traditions and dialogues that are included in the volume. The volume does not seek to reproduce or replace any of the excellent volumes and essays that cover and critique elements of the political realist tradition.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the *Realism Reader* is intended to provide a "one-stop-shop" for students taking a course in contemporary international relations theory, with a particular focus on realism. It is also envisioned as a resource for graduate students taking broader survey classes, and looking for a structure to bring together the considerable body of realist material that any such survey should encompass.

We do not, of course, claim to provide selections from every leading exemplar in every realist research program. Choosing and organizing the material that was available from such a rich and varied tradition was no easy task, and we often found ourselves having to decide between several equally worthy archetypes. Nevertheless, we believe that the material that is included provides the substantive content of the programs and dialogues being covered, and is representative of the broader range of material that could not be incorporated into the volume.

## Organization of the book

Following this introductory chapter, the *Realism Reader* is divided into three main sections. The longest part of the book covers seven different and distinctive approaches within the realist tradition: classical realism, balance of power theory, neorealism, defensive structural realism, offensive structural realism, rise and fall realism, and neoclassical realism. The middle section of the volume covers realism's contributions on critiques leveled by liberalism, institutionalism, and constructivism and the English School. The final section of the book provides materials on realism's engagement with some contemporary issues in international politics, with collections on United States (U.S.) hegemony, European cooperation, and whether future threats will arise from non-state actors or the rise of competing great powers.

## Paradigmatism and the study of international politics

The coverage of the research approaches in the first section of the book employs a mid-level typology which avoids the one-size-fits-all generalities of realism's critics. Critics of realism have a tendency to overstate the extent to which all realist theories comfortably fit within a single unified aggregate. The construct is too general to be used for theory description or appraisal, and ascribes common substance to fundamentally different theories. By confusing a general worldview with the hard cores of its associated research programs, the overarching approach taken by realism's critics shifts assessment away from different theories' conceptual and empirical content to the extent to which they cleave to the larger construct. In addition, by conflating all realism into a single construct, critics miss the weaknesses of the constituent research programs, which a more fine-grained analysis would distinguish. These include the internal inconsistencies of defensive structural realism, the empirical difficulties that trouble offensive structural realism, and the tautologies of neoclassical realism.

The mid-level typology offered in the *Realism Reader* also avoids the "every theory a research program" approach advocated by proponents of realism. While realism's advocates are more likely to be familiar with the nuances and complexities of different theories rooted in the tradition, and more aware of the diversity that divides their fellow travelers, they are sometimes too willing to overstate the heterogeneity of the tradition. The number of new terms coined for different theoretical aggregates produces an effect that is as debilitating as the critics' one-size-fits-all approach: a cacophony of claims to centrality for every innovation (Snyder 2002: 149–50).

Accordingly, the approach taken in this volume is to identify seven distinct research approaches. These were shaped by a combination of deductive arguments based on their shared core assumptions and logic, and inductive observations of how scholars commonly group themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Although there are significant differences among variants of realism, they largely share the view that the character of relations among states has not altered. Where there is change, it tends to occur in repetitive patterns. State behavior is driven by leaders' flawed human nature, or by the preemptive unpleasantness mandated by an anarchic international system. Selfish human appetites for power, or the need to accumulate the wherewithal to be secure in a self-help world, explain the seemingly endless succession of wars and conquest. Accordingly, most realists take a pessimistic and prudential view of international relations (Elman 2001; though, for an unusually optimistic realist approach, see Glaser 1994/95, 1997, 2010).

In describing and appraising the realist tradition, it is customary to take a metatheoretic approach, which differentiates it from other approaches, and which separates realist theories into distinct sub-groups (see Elman and Elman 2002, 2003). Accordingly, accounts of twentieth-century realism typically distinguish political realist, liberal and other traditions, as well as describe different iterations of realist theory. This chapter distinguishes between seven different variants of realism—classical, balance of power theory, neorealism, rise and fall, neoclassical, offensive structural, and defensive structural realism.

The groupings can be differentiated by the fundamental constitutive and heuristic assumptions that their respective theories share. For example, they differ on the sources of state preferences, in particular on the mix of human desire for power and/or the need to accumulate the wherewithal to be secure in a self-help world.

Realism's proponents argue that realist thinking extends well before the twentieth century, and often suggest that current theories are the incarnations of an extended intellectual

tradition (e.g. Walt 2002: 198; Donnelly 2000). Hence, scholars make the—often disputed—claim that realist themes can be found in important antiquarian works from Greece, Rome, India, and China (e.g. Smith 1986; Haslam 2002: 14. See Garst 1989 for a contrasting view). Since this volume begins with twentieth-century classical realism, we need not dwell on this controversy. It should be noted, however, that, while realism's interpretation of particular episodes have been disputed, even its critics (e.g. Wendt 2000) acknowledge that humankind has, in most times and in most places, lived down to realism's very low expectations.

## Classical realism

The ordering in the volume is not intended to suggest a strict temporal or intellectual succession. However, classical realism is usually held to be the first of the twentieth-century realist research programs. Classical realism is generally dated from 1939, and the publication of Edward Hallett Carr's *The Twenty Years' Crisis*. Classical realists are usually characterized as responding to then dominant liberal approaches to international politics (e.g. Donnelly 1995: 179), although scholars (e.g. Kahler 1997: 24) disagree on how widespread liberalism was during the interwar years. In addition to Carr, work by Frederick Shuman (1933), Harold Nicolson (1939), Reinhold Niebuhr (1940), Georg Schwarzenberger (1941), Martin Wight (1946), Hans Morgenthau (1948), George F. Kennan (1951), and Herbert Butterfield (1953) formed part of the realist canon. It was, however, Hans Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* that became the undisputed standard bearer for political realism, going through seven editions between 1948 and 2005.<sup>4</sup>

According to classical realism, because the desire for more power is rooted in the flawed nature of humanity, states are continuously engaged in a struggle to increase their capabilities. The absence of the international equivalent of a state's government is a permissive condition that gives human appetites free rein. In short, classical realism explains conflictual behavior by human failings. Wars are explained, for example, by particular aggressive statesmen, or by domestic political systems that give greedy parochial groups the opportunity to pursue self-serving expansionist foreign policies. For classical realists, international politics can be characterized as evil: bad things happen because the people making foreign policy are sometimes bad (Spiras 1996: 387–400).

Although not employing the formal mathematical modeling found in contemporary rational choice theory, classical realism nevertheless posits that state behavior can be understood as having rational microfoundations. As Morgenthau notes:

we put ourselves in the position of a statesman who must meet a certain problem of foreign policy under certain circumstances and we ask ourselves what the rational alternatives are from which a statesman may choose who must meet this problem under these circumstances (presuming always that he acts in a rational manner), and which of these rational alternatives this particular statesman is likely to choose. It is the testing of this rational hypothesis against the actual facts and their consequences that gives theoretical meaning to the facts of international politics.

(1985: 5; also see Chapter 2 of this volume, p. 54)

State strategies are understood as having been decided rationally, after taking costs and benefits of different possible courses of action into account.

Although it is foundational to the subsequent trajectory of the realist tradition, classical realism is not usually considered a contemporary approach to international politics. However,

#### 4 Introduction

recent developments suggest that a research community may be cohering to revive this approach, although it is too early to determine whether these efforts will be successful.<sup>5</sup>

### Balance of power theory

Although work on balance of power theory unarguably belongs in the realist tradition, it does not easily fit into the metatheoretic approach taken in this volume. While it is often taken to be a separate stand-alone body of scholarship, balance of power logic also infuses several of the other realist research programs.<sup>6</sup> For example, theories within the neorealist and defensive structural realist programs make balancing predictions.

Notwithstanding this overlap, we provided a separate chapter on balance of power theory for several reasons. First, it claims a long and venerable tradition as a separate body of scholarship (Seabury 1965: 7; Butterfield 1966: 136–9). Second, the work has generated a substantial body of material, and sustained a sufficiently coherent center, that it clearly warrants its own chapter. In addition, whether viewed as a separate approach or seen as components of other realist research programs, balance of power is used in multiple ways and with multiple meanings.

Balance of power theories commonly make one or both of two predictions. The first is that states engage in balancing behavior, the second that the international system tends toward equilibrium, i.e. the system moves back toward balance. Although all balance of power theories make at least one of these predictions, there is disagreement about whether balancing and/or balances are anticipated. There are also differences about the connection between the two phenomena: is balancing necessary for balances to form? Is the existence of a balance evidence that balancing has taken place? Theorists take different positions on these questions depending on which type of balance of power theory they advocate.

It is helpful to distinguish between three versions: manual, dyadic, and automatic balance of power theory.<sup>7</sup> Some theorists argue that balance of power theory predicts that states will intentionally act with a view to balancing the system. *Manual balance of power* theory (Claude 1962: 48–9) sees equilibrium resulting from the intentional acts of statesmen, who prefer a balanced system to possible alternatives. The reasons for that preference can be the belief that a balanced system is most likely to result in state survival, or the view that equilibrium carries with it some additional intrinsic benefits, such as a lower prevalence of war. It is important to note that theories that predict that states will act to countervail a would-be hegemon belong in this manual category: states perceive the likelihood of a systemic outcome they wish to avoid (hegemony by another state) and act to bring about a systemic outcome they prefer (balance). For example, this seems to be the kind of balancing Rosecrance has in mind when he suggests that “balancers must aim to create the public good of security against hegemony of the system as a whole, not simply to defend themselves” (2003: 157).<sup>8</sup>

Other theorists suggest that states will act to balance against other states’ rising power, but without any explicit preference for a particular systemic outcome. *Dyadic balance of power* theory anticipates that state actions will be designed to countervail threats posed by other states. Those threats may be operationalized differently, for example, by relative capabilities alone, or in combination with other indicators such as proximity and intentions. Dyadic balance of power theory does not require that the threatening state is likely to achieve hegemony, only that it is posing a threat that needs to be countervailed.

An *automatic balance of power* theory (Claude 1962: 43–6) suggests that the system will tend toward balance, regardless of the intentions or actions of individual states. This

view was famously captured by Jean Jacques Rousseau when he observed that the balance is not:

the work of any man, or that any man has deliberately done anything to maintain it. It is there; and men who do not feel themselves strong enough to break it conceal the selfishness of their designs under the pretext of preserving it. But, whether we are aware of it or not, the balance continues to support itself without the aid of any special intervention; if it were to break for a moment on one side, it would soon restore itself on another.<sup>9</sup>

(Rousseau 1756, in Hoffmann and Fidler 1991: 62)

Accordingly, the acid test for distinguishing automatic and manual variants is to ask whether equilibrium is achieved because statesmen intend to bring or keep the system in balance.<sup>10</sup>

Automatic balance of power theory seeks to explain why balances form in the international system, but is agnostic about why (or even whether) individual states will balance. Balances can only form in the presence of negative feedback, an impetus back in the direction of equilibrium. Balancing behavior is one obvious source of negative feedback. An important question for automatic balance of power theorists then is how much (if any) balancing is required in order to bring the system into equilibrium. There are at least three different possibilities: widespread balancing; sufficient balancing; and little or no balancing because of the presence of other types of negative feedback.

In addition to the material included as a stand-alone chapter on balance of power theory, these three variants of the theory are also to be found in several of the other research programs represented in the *Reader*.

### **Neorealism: Waltz's *Theory of International Politics***

Kenneth Waltz's 1979 *Theory of International Politics* replaced Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations* as the standard bearer for realists. In *Theory of International Politics*, Waltz (1979: 77) argues that systems are composed of a structure and their interacting units. Political structures are best conceptualized as having three elements: an ordering principle (anarchic or hierarchical), the character of the units (functionally alike or differentiated), and the distribution of capabilities (Waltz 1979: 88–99). Waltz argues that two elements of the structure of the international system are constants: the lack of an overarching authority means that its ordering principle is anarchy, and the principle of self-help means that all of the units remain functionally alike. Accordingly, the only structural variable is the distribution of capabilities, with the main distinction falling between multipolar and bipolar systems.

One difference between classical realism and neorealism is their contrasting views on the source and content of states' preferences. Contra classical realism, neorealism excludes the internal make-up of different states. As Rasler and Thompson (2001: 47) note, Morgenthau's (1948) seminal statement of classical realism relied on the assumption that leaders of states are motivated by their lust for power. Waltz's (1979: 91) theory, by contrast, omits leader's motivations and state characteristics as causal variables for international outcomes, except for the minimal assumption that states seek to survive.

In addition, whereas classical realism suggested that state strategies are selected rationally, Waltz is agnostic about which of several microfoundations explain state behavior, several of which are mentioned in this volume.<sup>11</sup> States' behavior can be a product of the competition among them, either because they calculate how to act to their best advantage, or because those that do not exhibit such behavior are selected out of the system. Alternatively, states'



## 6 Introduction

behavior can be a product of socialization: states can decide to follow norms because they calculate it is to their advantage, or because the norms become internalized.

Since the theory provides such a minimal account of preferences and microfoundations, it makes only indeterminate behavioral predictions, and Waltz is correspondingly reluctant to make foreign policy predictions (Waltz 1996; see also Elman 1996a, 1996b; Fearon 1998; Wivel 2005). Waltz nevertheless suggests that systemic processes will consistently produce convergent international outcomes. Waltz notes that international politics is characterized by a disheartening consistency; the same depressingly familiar things happen over and over. This repetitiveness endures despite considerable differences in internal domestic political arrangements, both through time (contrast, for example, seventeenth- and nineteenth-century England) and space (contrast, for example, the United States and Germany in the 1930s). Waltz's purpose is to explain why similarly structured international systems all seem to be characterized by similar outcomes, even though their units (i.e. member states) have different domestic political arrangements and particular parochial histories. Waltz concludes that it must be something peculiar to, and pervasive in, international politics that accounts for these commonalities. He therefore excludes as "reductionist" all but the thinnest of assumptions about the units that make up the system—they must, at a minimum, seek their own survival.

By focusing only minor attention on unit-level variables, Waltz aims to separate out the persistent effects of the international system. Jervis observes that:

We are dealing with a system when (a) a set of units or elements is interconnected so that changes in some elements or their relations produce changes in other parts of the system; and (b) the entire system exhibits properties and behaviours that are different from those parts.

(1997: 7)

Because systems are generative, the international political system is characterized by complex nonlinear relationships and unintended consequences. Outcomes are influenced by something more than simply the aggregation of individual states' behavior, with a tendency toward unintended and ironic outcomes. As a result, there is a gap between what states want and what states get. Consequently, unlike classical realists, neorealists see international politics as tragic, rather than as being driven by the aggressive behavior of revisionist states (Spiras 1996: 387–400). The international political outcomes that Waltz predicts include that multipolar systems will be less stable than bipolar systems; that interdependence will be lower in bipolarity than multipolarity; and that, regardless of unit behavior, hegemony by any single state is unlikely or even impossible.

Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* proved to be a remarkably influential volume, spinning off new debates and giving new impetus to existing disagreements. For example, the book began a debate over whether relative gains concerns impede cooperation among states (e.g. Grieco 1988; Snidal 1991a, 1991b; Powell 1991; Baldwin 1993; Grieco *et al.* 1993; Rousseau 2002), and added momentum to the then extant question of whether bipolar or multipolar international systems were more war prone (e.g. Deutsch and Singer 1964; Wayman 1984; Sabrosky 1985; Hopf 1991; Mansfield 1993).

### **Defensive structural realism**

Defensive structural realism developed, but is distinct, from neorealism (Glaser 2003a; Walt 2002). Defensive structural realism shares neorealism's minimal assumptions about state

motivations. Like neorealism, defensive structural realism suggests that states seek security in an anarchic international system—the main threat to their well-being comes from other states (Glaser 2003a, 2010; Walt 2002). There are three main differences between neorealism and defensive structural realism. First, whereas neorealism is agnostic about which of several possible microfoundations explains state behavior, defensive structural realism relies solely on rational choice. Second, defensive structural realism adds the offense–defense balance as a variable (see Van Evera 1999: 10). This is a composite variable combining a variety of different factors that make conquest harder or easier (for outstanding reviews of the offense–defense literature, see Lynn-Jones 1995, 2001). Defensive structural realists argue that prevailing technologies or geographical circumstances often favor defense, seized resources do not cumulate easily with those already possessed by the metropole, dominoes do not fall, and power is difficult to project at a distance (see, respectively, Christensen and Snyder 1990, Liberman 1993; Jervis and Snyder 1991). Accordingly, in a world in which conquest is hard, it may not take too much balancing to offset revisionist behavior. Third, combining rationality and an offense–defense balance that favors defense, defensive structural realists predict that states should support the status quo. Expansion is rarely structurally mandated, and balancing is the appropriate response to threatening concentrations of power (see, for example, Walt 1987, 1988, 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1996). Rationalism and an offense–defense balance that favors defense means that states balance, and balances result.

Perhaps the best-known variant of defensive structural realism is Stephen Walt’s “balance of threat” theory (Walt 1987, 1988, 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1996, 2000; see also Van Evera 1999; Snyder 1991; Glaser 1994/95, 1997, 2010). According to Walt, “in anarchy, states form alliances to protect themselves. Their conduct is determined by the threats they perceive and the power of others is merely one element in their calculations” (1987: x). Walt (2000: 200–1) suggests that states estimate threats posed by other states by their relative power, proximity, intentions, and the offense–defense balance. The resulting dyadic balancing explains the absence of hegemony in the system:

Together, these four factors explain why potential hegemonies like Napoleonic France, Wilhelmine Germany, and Nazi Germany eventually faced overwhelming coalitions: each of these states was a great power lying in close proximity to others, and each combined large offensive capabilities with extremely aggressive aims.

(Walt 2000: 201)

Because balancing is pervasive, Walt concludes that revisionist and aggressive behavior is self-defeating, and “status quo states can take a relatively sanguine view of threats. . . . In a balancing world, policies that convey restraint and benevolence are best” (1987: 27).

One difficult problem for defensive structural realism is that the research program is better suited to investigating structurally constrained responses to revisionism, rather than where that expansionist behavior comes from. To explain how conflict arises in the first place, defensive structural realists must appeal to either domestic-level factors (which are outside of their theories), or argue that extreme security dilemma dynamics make states behave as if they were revisionists. John Herz (1950: 157) was an early exponent of the concept of the security dilemma, arguing that defensive actions and capabilities are often misinterpreted as being aggressive (see also Butterfield 1951: 19–20).<sup>12</sup> Steps taken by states seeking to preserve the status quo are ambiguous, and are often indistinguishable from preparations for taking the offense. “Threatened” states respond, leading to a spiraling of mutual aggression that all would have preferred to avoid. This is international relations as tragedy, not evil: bad



## 8 Introduction

things happen because states are placed in difficult situations. To borrow Erskine and Lebow's description, choices "ineluctably lead to disastrous outcomes. The agent is . . . someone who has considerable free choice but is deeply affected by forces and structures beyond his control" (2012: 4).

For defensive structural realism to rely on security dilemma dynamics to explain war requires arguing that, despite the absence of pervasive domestic-level pathologies, revisionist behavior can be innocently initiated in a world characterized by status quo states, defense-dominance, and balancing (see Schweller 1996; Kydd 2005). This seems to be a hard argument to make in a world where increments in capabilities can be easily countered. Defensive structural realism's benign understanding of systemic constraints is consistent with Arnold Wolfers' (1962: 158–9) reading of the security dilemma, that states threatened by new, potentially offensive capabilities respond with measures of their own, leaving the first state in as precarious a position, if not worse off, than before. Indeed, it is the futility of expansionist behavior that leads defensive realists to suggest that states should seek an "appropriate" amount of power, not all that there is.

Hence, defensive structural realism is, for the most part, unable to locate the causes of revisionism and conflict at the system level. Not surprisingly, then, its proponents are natural allies of—and often themselves authors in—the neoclassical realist research program, which locates the causes of war at the domestic level, and in the pathologies of the particular units.

### Offensive structural realism

In contrast to the defensive structural realist prescription that states look for only an "appropriate" amount of power, offensive structural realists suggest that states should maximize power. The flagship statement, John Mearsheimer's (2001) *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, argues that states face an uncertain international environment in which any state might use its power to harm another. Under such circumstances, relative capabilities are of overriding importance, and security requires acquiring as much power compared to other states as possible (see also Labs 1997; Elman 2004). The stopping power of water means that the most a state can hope for is to be a regional hegemon, and for there to be no other regional hegemons elsewhere in the world.

Mearsheimer's (2001: 30–1) theory makes five assumptions: the international system is anarchic; great powers inherently possess some offensive military capability, and accordingly can damage each other; states can never be certain about other states' intentions; survival is the primary goal of great powers; and great powers are rational actors. From these assumptions, Mearsheimer (2001: 32–6) deduces that great powers fear each other; that they can rely only on themselves for their security; and that the best strategy for states to ensure their survival is maximization of relative power.

In contrast to defensive structural realists, who suggest that states look for only an "appropriate" amount of power (e.g. Glaser 1994/95, 1997; Van Evera 1999), Mearsheimer argues that security requires acquiring as much power relative to other states as possible. Mearsheimer (2001: 417, n. 27) explicitly rejects Glaser's (1997)—and thus Wolfers' (1962)—reading of the security dilemma, and argues that increasing capabilities can improve a state's security without triggering a countervailing response. Careful timing by revisionists, buck-passing by potential targets, and information asymmetries all allow the would-be hegemon to succeed. Power maximization is not necessarily self-defeating, and hence states can rationally aim for regional hegemony.

Although states will take any increment of power that they can get away with, Mearsheimer does not predict that states are "mindless aggressors so bent on gaining power that they

charge headlong into losing wars or pursue Pyrrhic victories” (2001: 37). States are sophisticated relative power maximizers that try “to figure out when to raise and when to fold” (2001: 40). Expanding against weakness or indecision, pulling back when faced by strength and determination, a sophisticated power maximizer reaches regional hegemony by using a combination of brains and brawn.

Mearsheimer (2001: 140–55) argues that ultimate safety comes only from being the most powerful state in the system. However, the “stopping power of water” makes such global hegemony all but impossible, except through attaining an implausible nuclear superiority. The second best, and much more likely, objective is to achieve regional hegemony, the dominance of the area in which the great power is located. Finally, even in the absence of either type of hegemony, states try to maximize both their wealth and their military capabilities for fighting land battles. In order to gain resources, states resort to war, blackmail, baiting other states into making war on each other, while standing aside, and engaging competitors in long and costly conflicts. When acting to forestall other states’ expansion, a great power can either try to inveigle a third party into coping with the threat (i.e. buck-pass), or balance against the threat themselves (2001: 156–62). While buck-passing is often preferred as the lower-cost strategy, balancing becomes more likely, *ceteris paribus*, the more proximate the menacing state, and the greater its relative capabilities.

In addition to moving Mearsheimer’s focus to the regional level, the introduction of the stopping power of water also leads to his making different predictions of state behavior depending on where it is located. While the theory applies to great powers in general (2001: 5, 403, n. 5), Mearsheimer distinguishes between different kinds: continental and island great powers, and regional hegemons. A continental great power will seek regional hegemony but, when it is unable to achieve this dominance, such a state will still maximize its relative power to the extent possible. An insular state, “the only great power on a large body of land that is surrounded on all sides by water” (2001: 126), will balance against the rising states rather than try to be a regional hegemon itself. Accordingly, states such as the United Kingdom act as offshore balancers, intervening only when a continental power is near to achieving primacy (2001: 126–8, 261–4). The third kind of great power in Mearsheimer’s theory is a regional hegemon such as the United States. A regional hegemon is a status quo state that will seek to defend the current favorable distribution of capabilities (2001: 42).

Mearsheimer’s theory provides a structural explanation of great power war, suggesting that “the main causes . . . are located in the architecture of the international system. What matters most is the number of great powers and how much power each controls” (2001: 337). Great power wars are least likely in bipolarity, where the system only contains two great powers, because there are fewer potential conflict dyads; imbalances of power are much less likely; and miscalculations leading to failures of deterrence are less common. While multipolarity is, in general, more war prone than bipolarity, some multipolar power configurations are more dangerous than others. Great power wars are most likely when multipolar systems are unbalanced; that is, when there is a marked difference in capabilities between the first and second states in the system, such that the most powerful possesses the means to bid for hegemony. Mearsheimer hypothesizes that the three possible system architectures range from unbalanced multipolarity’s war proneness to bipolarity’s peacefulness, with balanced multipolarity falling somewhere in between (2001: 337–46).

## Rise and fall realism

Rise and fall realism emerged during the 1950s as a distinct alternative to the balance of power theories that were then influencing international relations scholarship (Kugler and

Lemke 2000: 130). A.F.K. Organski's classic 1958 volume *World Politics* challenged the widely held view that power parity is a virtue in international relations by insisting that throughout history "world peace has coincided with periods of unchallenged supremacy of power, whereas the periods of approximate balance have been the periods of war" (Organski 1968a: 364). Organski's claim that hegemony is the foundation for peace, while balance is often associated with war, is a central theme of rise and fall realism.

In particular, the research program emphasizes that war between major powers is least likely when the international system is dominated by a single state, and when there is an absence of rising challengers vying for system leadership. Given its privileged position, a dominant state is capable of shaping the rules and practices of the international system in such a way as to satisfy its selfish interests. Stability is a product of this hegemonic order, as states that are dissatisfied with the status quo lack the capabilities to change it. However, as power becomes more evenly matched as a result of differential growth patterns, war over system leadership is likely to occur. As the power gap between the leading state and its potential challengers narrows, the declining hegemon may rationally calculate the need for preventative war in order to preserve its status as the world's top power (Gilpin 1981). In the absence of a preventative attack, a dissatisfied rising challenger could initiate a war in an attempt to capture the top spot and all of the benefits that go along with it (Organski 1968a, 1968b).

Rise and fall realism frames international relations as the successive rise and fall of great powers. In order to explain this repeating dynamic, the research program pays particular attention to the differential growth mechanisms that cause states to gain or drop relative to one another. The disparate growth rates are largely viewed as being caused by processes that are internal to states. These include the timing of industrialization (Organski 1958, 1968b), social formation and type of economic system (Gilpin 1981), bureaucratic politics and productivity (Doran 1983), and military, economic, and technological innovation (Modelski 1978). These processes are not at work in all states at the same time or to the same extent, and hence states tend to rise and fall in relation to one another. The timing of internal developments produces the periods of transition from one system leader to the next, and these transitions are often marked by war.

The rise and fall research program includes a number of theories that explain differential growth patterns and the onset of major power war. These include power transition theory (Organski 1958, 1968a, 1968b; Organski and Kugler 1980; Kugler and Organski 1989; Kugler and Lemke 1996, 2000; Lemke 1995, 1996; DiCicco and Levy 1999, 2003), hegemonic war theory (Gilpin 1981, 1988), power cycle theory (Doran 1983, 1989, 2000; Doran and Parsons 1980), leadership long cycle theory (Modelski 1978; Modelski and Morgan 1985; Thompson 1983, 1986, 1990; Rasler and Thompson 1983, 1985, 1991, 1994, 2000), and dynamic differentials theory (Copeland 2001). These theories are differentiated from each other by the position they take on a number of key issues, including (1) whether it is the rising challenger or the declining hegemon that initiates war; (2) what specific internal process(es) drive differential growth; and (3) their scope conditions, in particular whether the theory is applicable across time and space, or limited to a period of history or a particular region of the world.

While continuing to emphasize the onset of major power war, in recent years, rise and fall realists have extended their studies to other important aspects of international relations. For example, Douglas Lemke (1995, 1996) has applied power transition theory to dyads other than those involving states directly contesting for system leadership, while Lemke and Jacek Kugler (2000) have studied the theory's implications for nuclear deterrence. Moreover,

recent theoretical emendations, such as Woosang Kim's (1991, 1992, 1996, 2002) addition of alliances to the calculation of differential growth and Dale Copeland's (2001) use of security concerns and polarity to explain great power competition, have enriched the explanatory power of the research program and provided a solid foundation for future research on power trends and war.

### Neoclassical realism

In part responding to what were perceived as the anti-reductionist excesses of neorealism (e.g. Snyder 1991: 19) neoclassical realism suggests that state behavior is strongly influenced by factors located at the domestic level of analysis. Neoclassical realism employs a "transmission belt" (Rose 1998) approach to foreign policy, which illustrates how systemic pressures are filtered through variables inside the nation-state to produce specific foreign policy decisions. As noted above, neoclassical realism is also a natural concomitant to defensive structural realism, because it provides explanations for revisionist behavior and war, which are missing from a benign understanding of systemic constraints (Glaser 2003a).

Neoclassical realists usually argue that pressures from the international system are often unclear and indeterminate. The international arena is murky and difficult to read, threats and opportunities are not easily identifiable, and there is a wide range of possible policies open to statesmen for meeting strategic goals. Given these challenges, variables at the unit-level often intervene between the international system and state behavior to determine the precise nature and direction of a state's foreign economic and military policy. In particular, neoclassical realists stress the role that the perceptions of key decision-makers (Christensen and Snyder 1990; Wohlforth 1993) and the unity and extractive capacity of the state (Christensen 1996; Zakaria 1998; Schweller 2006; Taliaferro 2006; Lobell *et al.* 2009) play in shaping how states respond to systemic imperatives.

Randall Schweller's (2006) theory of "under-balancing" is a good example of the transmission belt approach favored by neoclassical realists. Schweller's point of departure is consistent with structural realism, suggesting that how states behave in international politics is strongly influenced by relative capabilities. Schweller notes, however, that exactly how a state reacts to threatening accumulations of power depends on the degree to which it embodies structural realism's unitary actor assumption. When systemic pressures are transmitted through states that are unified at the elite and societal levels, decision-makers find it easy to recognize threats and carry out appropriate balancing strategies to counter them. Fragmented states, on the other hand, find it difficult to respond. Elite decision-makers cannot come to an agreement on the nature of a threat or how best to deal with it, and the state apparatus lacks the necessary extractive power to tap society for the resources needed to address the external threat. According to Schweller, both France and Britain were fragmented states prior to the Second World War, and this explains why they both underreacted to the threat posed by a rising Germany.

Similar frameworks have been used by a host of scholars to explain a variety of foreign policy behaviors, particularly those that seem to deviate from the baseline predictions of defensive structural realism and neorealism. Neoclassical realists have developed theories to explain over-extension (Dueck 2006; Layne 2006a; Snyder 1991), under-expansion (Zakaria 1998; Schweller 2009), under-balancing (Schweller 2006; Lobell 2009), risk-taking behavior (Taliaferro 2004), poor alliance decisions (Christensen and Snyder 1990), and unwarranted antagonism (Christensen 1996; Sterling-Folker 2009), just to name a few.

## **Realism and its challengers**

As a family of leading approaches to the study of international relations, realism has always contended with detractors. In some respects, this persistent attention is a reflection of the tradition's importance. Even its harshest critics would acknowledge that realist theories, with their focus on power, fear, and anarchy, have provided influential explanations for conflict and war. Where realist accounts are disputed, they have nevertheless often set scholars' baseline expectations. Proponents of other approaches commonly frame their value by claiming superiority over realist alternatives, especially their traction over deviant or puzzling cases for realism.

The nature and relative popularity of these alternatives have changed over time. In the early and mid-twentieth century, liberals mounted the strongest of these challenges, with arguments about the improbability of human nature, universal versus national interests, and the production and maintenance of peace. Bolstered by the popularity of works by Carr (1939/1946) and Morgenthau (1948), realist understandings weathered these critiques, and they were considered especially influential in the period following the Second World War. In the 1960s and '70s, however, a combination of methodological and substantive arguments led to a decline in that impact. Realists were strongly identified with traditional approaches to social analysis, and hence became collateral damage in the second "great debate" (Guzzini 1998). In addition, a burst of research on international political economy and the popularity of theories of economic interdependence (e.g. Keohane and Nye 1977) helped send realist approaches into steep decline (Mearsheimer 2001: 408, n. 32). The new research stressed the importance of non-state actors, such as multinational corporations and transnational organizations, and emphasized the constraining effects of liberal economic arrangements. Realists' state-centrism and focus on material power seemed dated.

As noted above, realism rebounded in 1979 with the publication of Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*. Partly because of its popularity, and partly because of its own "take-no-prisoners" criticism of competing theories, Waltz's book quickly became a prominent target. As time went by, detractors (for example, the contributors to Robert Keohane's 1986 edited volume *Neorealism and Its Critics*) chipped away at the book's arguments. Non-realist work became more prevalent and prominent, including liberal investigations of the democratic peace, and neoliberal institutionalist explanations for international cooperation (see Russett 1993; Baldwin 1993; Owen 2000; Keohane and Martin 2003; Ray 2003). In addition, critics challenged realism on several fronts, including its conceptions of anarchy (Milner 1991; Wendt 1992; Buzan 1993; Buzan *et al.* 1993) and power (Baldwin 1989), and its inability to explain important international events (Lebow 1994).

Realism's decline in the 1990s was accelerated by international events. As noted below, an assortment of phenomena surrounding the end of the Cold War provided difficult terrain for realists. These included the Soviet Union's voluntary retrenchment and subsequent demise; the continuation of Western European integration in the absence of American-Soviet competition; the wave of democratization and economic liberalization throughout the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and the developing world; and the improbability of war between the great powers. Realism, at the turn of the century, seemed out of touch (Jervis 2002). It appeared that liberal or constructivist theories could better appreciate and explain the changes taking place in the international arena.

Post-9/11, with security concerns again front and center, there has been a sharp resurgence in the realist tradition. With multiple recent and active conflicts, political realism has become correspondingly more popular, not least because it seems better able to grasp a more difficult



international environment. Accordingly, notwithstanding declarations that the “paradigm wars” have ended, we can expect the realist tradition to continue grappling with competing research traditions. We have included representations of liberalism, institutionalism, and constructivism in the *Reader*. Although differing in some respects, we have also grouped constructivism with a separate treatment of the English School.

As with the *Reader*’s approach to the variety of realist theories, the book takes a metatheoretic approach to challengers who have confronted the tradition. We do not, however, claim to provide a comprehensive account of the four alternatives we address. Each could easily provide sufficient material for its own dedicated full-length volume, and it is impossible to fully characterize the approaches in the available space. The intention is instead to represent how these competing research traditions engage with realist scholarship, and how different realists have responded to those criticisms.

As noted above, over the years, the most persistent opponent to the realist tradition has been liberalism. The realist–liberal debate has gone through several iterations since its inception in the interwar years, with the pendulum swinging to favor one or other tradition. One recent round of this enduring dialogue has focused on the relationship between democracy and peace. In both its monadic (democracies are less war prone than non-democracies) and dyadic (democracies do not fight each other) forms, the democratic peace theory presents a major challenge to realism’s pessimism about the conduct of international relations (see Elman 1997).

While there is some variation in the degree of pessimism expressed by the respective realist research programs, most agree that conflict is an enduring feature of international relations, and that peace is difficult to establish and maintain. History happens over and over again. According to liberals, by contrast, democracy offers a way out of realism’s conflict-ridden, self-help world. Different variants of democratic peace theory rely on different causal mechanisms. For example, some liberals suggest that democratic norms, liberal political institutions, or a synthesis of the two make democracies less likely than other kinds of states to engage in violent conflict (Rummel 1995), or prevent them from fighting each other (Owen 1994).

Although democratic peace theory has been very popular in both academic and policy-making worlds, most realists remain unconvinced that democratic norms and institutions have the pacifying effects different variants of the theory suggest. Scholars have developed several strong counterarguments. These include: that the lack of war between democracies is the result of liberal states having common enemies (Farber and Gowa 1995); that proponents have relied on inconsistent definitions of democracy and war to support their claims (Layne 1994; Elman 1997); and that the theory has been poorly tested and lacks empirical support (Layne 1994; Rosato 2003).

Democratic peace theory has also figured in a wider debate between realists and liberals on the broader question about the sources of state preferences (Moravcsik 1997; Rathbun 2010). According to Moravcsik (1997), liberalism sees a state’s policy preferences as a reflection of the interests of powerful groups found in its domestic society. This “bottom-up” view of foreign policy stands in contrast to structural realist theories, which see states worrying about threats to survival, and responding to cues from the international system. For example, offensive and defensive realism argue that state behavior reflects systemic constraints arising from the distribution of material power in the international system. Even neoclassical realism (Rose 1998; Lobell *et al.* 2009), which includes domestic-level variables, argues that foreign policies are a product of systemic pressures being filtered through the domestic level of analysis.

In addition to liberalism, realists have also responded to a separate series of challenges posed by institutionalist theory (aka neoliberal institutionalism). The major claim of institutional theory is that the debilitating effects of anarchy can be ameliorated by international institutions (see, especially, Keohane 1984, 1986; Baldwin 1993). Institutionalists adopt several of structural realism's baseline assumptions, including that the international system is anarchic and that states practice self-help. They are more hopeful, however, about the prospects for long-term international cooperation. They insist that international institutions, defined as sets of rules that constrain behaviors and form expectations, can help states achieve mutually beneficial ends, in part by providing information about others' intentions (see, for example, Keohane and Martin 2003). Institutionalists argue that their theoretical moves solve a vexing problem for the realist tradition: the inability to explain the pervasiveness of extensive and highly institutionalized international cooperation (Keohane and Martin 2003).

Realists, of course, notice that cooperation often occurs in the international system, especially in areas that do not directly involve security (Mearsheimer 1994/95). Nevertheless, they suggest that international institutions do not play an independent role in fostering this relationship (Grieco 1988; Mearsheimer 1994/95). A characteristic argument is that international institutions have no independent causal effect. Dominant states design international institutions to serve their self-seeking interests. To the extent that institutions conflict with states' goals, they are ignored. Further, even realists who concede that institutions can promote cooperation suggest that they can only do so when a state is worried about how much *it* will gain (absolute gains) from a cooperative arrangement. They are more doubtful that institutions have the capacity to produce greater cooperation if a state is primarily concerned about how much more *others* will gain (relative gains) from collaboration (Grieco 1988; Mearsheimer 1994/95). For realists, it is these relative gains concerns that constitute the major obstacle to cooperation. Because states worry about the future intentions of a current collaborator, they will avoid agreements that give the other side an opportunity to achieve more from cooperation (Waltz 1979; Grieco 1988; Mearsheimer 1994/95). In so far as institutions do not manage the division of spoils to ensure that neither party is differentially advantaged, they do not reduce concerns about relative gains and so cannot promote agreements.

A third group of challenges to realist understandings springs from the approaches that focus on ideational sources of state behavior. Consequently, we have included a selection of readings engaging the separate (but nevertheless not wholly unlike) constructivist and English School traditions. According to constructivists (Wendt 1992, 1999), the character of international affairs is contingent on the particular understandings states share. Anarchy has no meaning independent of the nature of the social interactions between states. State identities both constitute and are constituted by the social situation in which they are embedded. Where it is adversarial, then they will regard each other as enemies and have an interest in competing with each other. Hence, anarchy's role in encouraging competitive behavior is contingent on whether states have an oppositional understanding of the international system. However, if states behave cordially and come to see others as friends, there will be little prospect of competition or conflict. Under these circumstances, anarchy does not constrain states to behave competitively. For constructivists, it is the structure of interests and identities, and not material power, that ultimately determines whether the world is beset by fear and conflict, or enjoys amity and cooperation.

Similarly, English School scholars (Buzan 1993; Buzan *et al.* 1993; Little 2003) suggest that, although there is no overarching authority to regulate inter-state relations, states

nevertheless operate in an international society.<sup>13</sup> This society provides international laws and a set of societal norms that constrain and inform their behavior. Moreover, these laws and norms help regulate and moderate state action, which might otherwise provoke conflict. As a consequence, the English School sees international life as being less conflictual than most realist theories suggest. Instead, states in the international society respect the laws and norms that preserve their survival and increase the quality of their international interactions. More recent versions of English School arguments have also focused on world society, which is constituted by individuals rather than states.

Realists (for example, Copeland 2000, 2003) have responded to these more sanguine takes on international relations by suggesting that constructivism and the English School pay insufficient attention to the realities of power and the fears that states have about the intentions of their peers. While two allies may not have a reason to fear each other today, neither can be sure that the other will not develop revisionist intentions in the future. Thus, realists maintain that states treat others, including current “friends,” with suspicion and fear. States will avoid entangling themselves in political, economic, and military arrangements that may inhibit their ability to protect themselves down the road.

The paradigmatic competitors described in this section (and covered in the readings in Chapters 9 to 11) have presented serious challenges to different variants of realism. However, perhaps even more tellingly, realist research programs have struggled to explain important international events, and to seem relevant to contemporary international concerns (Lebow 1994; Vasquez 1997). It is to these issues that we now turn.

## **The contemporary relevance of realism**

Realist understandings of international relations have been challenged by, and have developed in response to, difficult questions about recent and contemporary events. These include the end of the Cold War, the continuation of European integration, the absence of balancing in the face of American hegemony, and the rising importance of non-state actors.

With respect to the end of the Cold War, realists of all stripes failed to anticipate the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent shift from a bipolar to unipolar world. Subsequent post hoc explanations have been offered, and debated at length. Space constraints prevented us from including excerpts from these discussions in the current volume, but the absence should not suggest that we dismiss the question. The debate over the causes of the end of the Cold War remains an important issue for international relations theorists, including realists.<sup>14</sup>

We do include four other recent topics in the *Reader*: the persistence of American hegemony, the continuation of European integration, the move to a non-state-centric view of international relations, and questions about the implications of the rise of China.

### ***American hegemony***

Utilizing Waltz’s neorealism, realists made bold predictions in the 1990s that forecast the quick demise of U.S. hegemony (Waltz 1993; Layne 1993). According to these realists, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the resulting concentration of power in the hands of the U.S. would cause other states to react, most likely by forming a balancing coalition against it. Twenty years later, that anticipated great power competition has yet to resume. The absence of balancing has triggered a vibrant conversation about the implications of U.S. primacy for analyzing modern international affairs.<sup>15</sup>



Realists have disagreed among themselves about whether unipolarity is a durable feature of the international system. William Wohlforth (1999) draws on balance of power theory and rise and fall realism to argue that unipolarity is a safe and highly stable system configuration. According to Wohlforth, the enormous power advantage enjoyed by the U.S., coupled with its distance from Europe and Asia, effectively dissuades other states from taking firm measures to counter its power. These states are instead more concerned about each other and the prospects of maintaining balance in their own regions. Thus, for Wohlforth, American hegemony is likely to persist into the foreseeable future. Wohlforth developed this argument further with Stephen Brooks (2008), suggesting that the distribution of capabilities has tipped so far in favor of the United States that traditional understandings of balancing have no purchase over contemporary international relations.

Other realists, most prominently Christopher Layne, have continued to suggest that America is declining, and that other great powers are in the process of catching up. Layne (2006b) insists that American hegemony is on its way out, and in 2011 he doubled down, arguing that the unipolar era is drawing to a close. Layne (2011) points to the rise of China, as well as America's imperial overstretch and economic woes, to suggest that what he calls *Pax Americana* is done.<sup>16</sup>

Although realists disagree about the durability of America's predominance, almost all would agree that there has been a period of time when it was the sole great power. One related question is how other states have grappled with that situation. Some scholars have argued that, since these less powerful states do not have the wherewithal to directly confront America, they have instead taken a less militaristic "soft-balancing" approach to undermine its position. Soft balancing is a way of countering another state's power without directly confronting it. The technique involves the use of political, economic, and diplomatic maneuvers, such as regional trade agreements, territorial and air space denial, and institutional delays, to foil or frustrate another state's foreign policy plans. According to soft-balancing proponents (Pape 2005; Paul 2005; Paul *et al.* 2004; Walt 2006), soft balancing is intended to make U.S. foreign policy an expensive and exhausting undertaking. Proponents of this view point to the 2003 Iraq War, and the international backlash that it provoked, as the starting point of soft balancing against the U.S.

### ***European integration***

Realists have also been grappling with questions about what to expect in Europe. John Mearsheimer (1990, 2001) has long argued that the absence of a great power threat in Europe should have caused the U.S. to withdraw from the continent, leaving the European states to compete with each other. In particular, other states were expected to fear Germany's size, economic strength, and geopolitical ambition, which would put it in a position to dominate Europe.

In contrast to these opinions, some realists have suggested that European integration is likely to continue, especially in the realm of security, as the states of Europe attempt to counter U.S. power. These scholars are divided, however, over the question of how Europe is likely to go about trying to curtail American hegemony. Traditional balance of power realists claim that the states of Europe and Asia will use material means, such as military alliances, to balance the U.S. For example, Barry Posen (2006) has pointed to the European Union's (EU) adoption of the Common Defence and Security Policy (formerly known as the European Security and Defence Policy), which gives the EU the ability to carry out independent military missions within and outside of Europe, as a clear sign that Europe is taking traditional steps to balance U.S. power.

### *Nonstate actors*

Realists have long been criticized for the tradition's failure to take account of the role that non-state actors play in international relations. Recent versions of this critique have focused on the security challenges that non-state actors present for the international community. In particular, realism has been derided by critics (*RIS* 2003) as an approach that is unable to say much of anything about international terrorism and religiously motivated violence. Given that non-state actors and transnational terrorism lie well outside of realism's traditional focus, some realists agree with these criticisms, but also insist that they have been exaggerated. Charles Glaser (2003b), for example, claims that realist concepts, like the security dilemma and offense–defense balance, have made important contributions to the study of the causes of internal war and ethnic violence (see Posen 1993). Others argue that the realist research programs can easily amend their core assumptions to include non-state actors, which would allow realists to develop theories to explain unconventional forms of violence (e.g. Brenner 2006).

### *The rise of China*

Notwithstanding realism's limited engagement with non-state actors, there is little doubt that its main center of gravity continues to be great power competition. Most realists continue to see the major threats to international security arising from other nation-states. Accordingly, one prominent issue is whether the rise of China is a pressing concern for American foreign policy.<sup>17</sup>

While realists seem to be unified in the opinion that the growth of Chinese power will dominate international affairs in the coming years, they are not in agreement when it comes to predicting what effect China's rise will have on international stability (see Friedberg 2005; Christensen 2006; Legro 2007; and Fravel 2010). While offensive structural realists and rise and fall realists share a pessimistic view of the consequences of China's tremendous growth for global security, defensive structural realists are more optimistic that relations between China and the rest of the world can remain peaceful. Neoclassical realism is open to a wide range of potential outcomes, spanning from mutual accommodation to outright war.

Considering that the rise of China will likely dominate a good deal of realist scholarship in the coming years, it is useful to briefly look at how the four contemporary varieties of realism—offensive structural, defensive structural, rise and fall, and neoclassical—see the rise of Chinese power influencing the course of international relations in the future.

### *Offensive structural realism*

Offensive realism paints a bleak picture of the future of international relations if China continues its ascendancy (see Mearsheimer 2001, 2006; Wang 2004; Fravel 2010). Offensive realists argue that, given the required capabilities, states will pursue regional hegemony as the best means of staying safe in a dangerous world. The U.S. did so in the nineteenth century when it pushed the European powers out of the Western Hemisphere and went on to dominate the region. Most offensive realists stress that there is no reason to assume that if given the chance China will behave any differently (although, for a contrasting view, see Elman 2004).

In particular, offensive realism predicts that, if China's power continues to grow, it is likely to assert greater control in Asia. China will invest more of its resources in military

capabilities in order to become the predominant power in the region. While China may not use those capabilities to conquer its regional neighbors, it will use them to try to dictate how they behave. China will also look to force the U.S. from the region through a mix of military might and its own version of the Monroe Doctrine (Mearsheimer 2006: 162).

For their part, China's neighbors and the U.S. are not likely to sit idly by and watch as China takes over. Fearing for their security, powerful countries, like Japan, Russia, and India, and small ones, like South Korea and Vietnam, will join the U.S. in a balancing coalition to counter China's rise (Mearsheimer 2006). Intense security competition between China and the American-led coalition is likely to result, with the U.S. pursuing aggressive policies in an attempt to remain the world's only regional hegemon. While this rivalry will not guarantee violent conflict, it will create a situation where war is significantly more likely.

### *Defensive structural realism*

Defensive realists are more optimistic about China's rise and the future of international security. As they see it, the international system is relatively benign. Aggressive behavior and power maximization usually trigger self-defeating balancing coalitions; technology and geography make offensive action difficult; and states can signal their peaceful intentions. Rational states, therefore, have little reason to worry about each other based on considerations of power alone. Thus, while China's rise in power will not be welcomed by its neighbors or the United States, it need not be feared by them either.

To be sure, defensive realists expect that as China continues to rise it will devote more of its resources to military technology and capabilities. And, although these developments could spark the security dilemma dynamics that can lead to arms racing and war, defensive realists stress that measures can be taken by China to signal to other states that these investments are meant for security purposes alone (see Glaser 1994/95). For example, China could limit its military investments to technologies that work well for defense, but have little or no offensive use. When paired with the belief that conquest is difficult because of defensive advantage and the pervasiveness of balancing, defensive realists expect that any security competition that occurs as a result of China's growth in power will be countered by a healthy dose of assurance and rational restraint. This is not to say that defensive realists believe that war between China and an American-led coalition is impossible. Rather, defensive realism stresses that if war were to occur it would not be because structure mandated it. Some domestic-level pathology would be to blame.

### *Rise and fall realism*

Rise and fall realism shares offensive realism's pessimism about a rising China and the prospects for cooperation and peace in international politics (see, for example, Fravel 2010). According to this view, increased security competition and major power war are most likely when a rising challenger and declining hegemon approach power parity. Thus, as China rises relative to the U.S., rise and fall realists expect to see relations between the two countries become increasingly antagonistic, reaching crisis levels as they near each other on measures of material power (see Kugler and Lemke 2000). If this occurs, the U.S. is unlikely to willingly or peacefully cede to China its position atop the international system and the remarkable advantages that go along with it. Instead, American officials could deem that preventative actions, including war, are necessary to forestall China's rise and preserve U.S. hegemony. Likewise, as China's power increases, Chinese leaders are

likely to demand more influence in international politics and a greater share of international spoils. If these expectations are not met, China could try to dethrone the U.S. by launching a hegemonic war.

For rise and fall realism, whether or not China's growth ultimately results in contained security competition or a catastrophic war depends in large part on China's ability to continue its extraordinary trajectory. China's rise is driven primarily by domestic processes, including industrialization, that could break down or end before it becomes powerful enough to challenge the U.S. for international dominance. Rise and fall realism also stresses that, even if Chinese growth were to continue at current levels, much of how the two states behave toward each other in the future will come down to American and Chinese evaluations of the status quo. American officials are more likely to be open to taking preventative action to stop the rise of China if they believe that the decline of the U.S. is deep and inevitable (Copeland 2001). Similarly, Chinese leaders are more likely to evaluate the status quo unfavorably if they deem that the policies and actions of the U.S. significantly limit their ability to achieve benefits in line with the country's growing power (Kugler and Lemke 2000).

### *Neoclassical realism*

Neoclassical realism anticipates that basing predictions on objective power trends alone will lead to inaccurate guesses about the foreign policy decisions that China, its neighbors, and the U.S. are liable to make. A more accurate understanding of what these players are likely to do requires a consideration of the domestic-level factors that shape how states interpret and respond to systemic constraints.

In particular, neoclassical realism expects that the perceptions of key decision-makers and the ability of the state to mobilize resources for the purposes of foreign policy will play a decisive role in determining how China behaves and how others respond. Thomas Christensen's (1996) study of Sino-American relations during the early part of the Cold War showed that Chinese and American leaders frequently prolonged short-term crises between the two countries, often risking war, in order to mobilize resources from their domestic societies for the purpose of long-term grand strategy. If this were to be the case again, neoclassical realism would expect future relations between China and the U.S. to be more hostile than they are today as a result of leaders in both countries trying to cope with weak state institutions and the inability to extract resources from their citizens.

Neoclassical realism also expects that perceptions of China's rise in the U.S. and Asia will play a large part in determining whether China's growth is met with suspicion and fear, or reassurance and collaboration. If American and Asian officials perceive China's growth to be threatening, they are considerably more likely to adopt aggressive containment strategies than they are if they view China as having benign intentions. Given that perceptions are based on a number of complex factors, including past behaviors, shared expectations, and the cognitive biases of individual leaders, it is difficult to predict how China's growth will be viewed years from now by individuals who are tasked with making foreign policy decisions.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has reviewed seven variants of realism: classical realism, balance of power theory, neorealism, rise and fall realism, neoclassical realism, defensive structural realism, and offensive structural realism. As the discussion has shown, realism is a multifaceted and durable tradition of inquiry in security studies, with an extraordinary facility for adaptation.

The development of the realist tradition within these separate components has at least three significant ramifications.

First, while the research programs have some common characteristics with each other, none makes wholly overlapping arguments or predictions. Although it is possible to support some general remarks about the realist tradition (for example, the observations about realism's continuity and pessimism in the introduction to this chapter), one should otherwise be leery of statements that begin "Realism says . . ." or "Realism predicts . . ." Different realist theories say and predict different things. They will also have very different implications when considered as the basis for prescriptive policy. For example, the best offensive structural realism has to offer the world is an armed and watchful peace anchored in mutual deterrence, punctuated by wars triggered by structurally driven revisionism when a state calculates it can gain at another's expense. The best defensive structural realism has to offer is a community of status quo states which have successfully managed to signal their peaceful intentions and/or refrained from obtaining ambiguously offensive capabilities.

Second, realism's capacity for change opens the tradition to some criticisms. For example, realists have been scolded for making self-serving adjustments to their theories to avoid contradiction by empirical anomalies. John Vasquez (1997) argues that balance-of-power theory, as described and defended by Kenneth Waltz (1979), Stephen Walt (1987), Thomas Christensen and Jack Snyder (1990), Randall Schweller (1994), and Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (1995), is degenerative when judged by Imre Lakatos' (1970) criteria. Vasquez suggests that balance of power theory is empirically inaccurate, but that succeeding versions of the theory have become progressively looser to allow it to accommodate disconfirming evidence. A related critique was launched by Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik (1999), who argue that recent realists subsume arguments that are more usually associated with competing liberal or constructivist approaches. The result, they argue, is that realist theories have become less determinate, coherent, and distinctive. These critiques have provoked vigorous and ongoing responses from realist scholars (see, for example, Feaver *et al.* 2000; Vasquez and Elman 2003). These debates are captured in Chapter 15 of this volume.

Finally, despite its internal divisions and external critics, the realist tradition continues to be a central contributor to security studies. Now fully recovered from the excessive optimism of the immediate post-Cold War milieu, the tradition is likely to provide a substantial share of our explanations and understandings of the causes of conflict and war.

## Notes

- 1 This chapter is an amended version of Elman 2008 and Elman and Jensen 2012, and draws and expands upon Elman 1996a, 1996b, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2007.
- 2 See, for example, Smith 1986; Griffiths 1992; Wayman and Diehl 1994; Brooks 1997; Frankel 1997a, 1997b; Guzzini 1998; Jervis 1998; Donnelly 2000; James 2002; Haslam 2002; Walt 2002; Williams 2005; Clinton 2007; and Freyberg-Inan *et al.* 2009.
- 3 There are of course long-standing arguments about whether paradigmaticism is better viewed as a philosophy or history of scientific practice. The approach taken here is that it is both.
- 4 The later editions post-dated Morgenthau's passing, and were edited by Kenneth Thompson (6th edition) and David Clinton (7th edition).
- 5 For example, Jonathan Kirshner organized a conference "Classical Realism and International Relations," at Cornell University's Reppy Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies, May 3–4, 2013.
- 6 See Little 2007 for a discussion of how balance of power theory is represented in several texts, which the current volume groups into distinct research programs. See Kaufman *et al.* 2007 for a recent application of balance of power theory to a variety of historical episodes.

- 7 See Nexon 2009 for an alternative schema for grouping theories that address balancing and balances.
- 8 See also Gulick 1955/1967.
- 9 See also Wight 1966: 166–7.
- 10 A hybrid “semi-automatic” system combines elements of the automatic and manual arrangements (see Claude 1962: 47–8). A state acting as the “holder of the balance” manually intervenes when an otherwise automatic system appears to be heading out of equilibrium. This view is typically associated with British balance of power policies from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries, but can be discerned as early as 1520 in Henry VIII’s motto at the Field of the Cloth of Gold: *Cui adhaereo prae est*, rendered by Butterfield as “the one that I join is the one who will turn the scales” (1966: 138) and by Luard as “the one that I join will prevail” (1992: 4). For the view that the United States should be pursuing a similar “offshore balancing” strategy, see Christopher Layne’s essay in Chapter 12 of this volume.
- 11 See Keohane and Martin 2003: 74, n. 6. for a description of a vigorous and frank exchange between Robert Keohane and Kenneth Waltz on whether neorealism assumes rationality.
- 12 For a more recent treatment, see Booth and Wheeler 2008.
- 13 There is an extensive literature advancing or engaging the English School. Examples include: Buzan 2004; Bellamy 2005; Clark 2005, 2007; and Linklater and Suganami 2006. See Dunne 1998 for an account of the origins of the English School. See Navari 2009 for a treatment of the school’s methods.
- 14 For a recent exercise in stock-taking on discussions of American power, see the special issue of *International Politics* that Deudney and Ikenberry (2012) introduced. Wohlforth’s (2012) “No one loves a realist explanation” provides a trenchant defense of a realist interpretation for the end of the Cold War. Wohlforth’s position has developed over several years and in several publications. See, for example, Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/2001, 2003, 2004, 2007; Schweller and Wohlforth 2000; and Wohlforth 1994–95, 1996, 1998, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005.
- 15 For recent discussions of unipolarity from a variety of theoretical perspectives, see Ikenberry *et al.* 2011, and the June 2011 special issue of the *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, comprising Simms 2011; Voeten 2011; Bromley 2011; Glaser 2011; Layne 2011; Kupchan 2011; Schweller 2011; Legro 2011; and Brooks and Wohlforth 2011.
- 16 There is an extensive literature on whether the U.S. is in relative decline. Layne 2009 reviews several recent volumes discussing U.S. prospects. Other examples from the debate include Pape 2009 and Rachman 2011 arguing that the US is declining, and Luttwak 2008, Joffe 2009, and Lieber 2012 taking a more optimistic view.
- 17 Mearsheimer 2001, 2006; Glaser 2003b. See Beckley 2011/2012 and Drezner 2011 for the argument that America’s predominance is likely to persist. See Subramanian 2011 for a contrasting view.

## References

- Baldwin, David A. (1989), *Paradoxes of Power* (New York: Basil Blackwell).
- Baldwin, David A. (ed.) (1993), *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press).
- Beckley, Michael (2011/2012), ‘China’s Century? Why America’s Edge Will Endure,’ *International Security*, (Winter) 36(3): 41–78.
- Bellamy, Alex J. (ed.) (2005), *International Society and its Critics* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Booth, Ken and Nicholas J. Wheeler (2008), *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation and Trust in World Politics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan).
- Brenner, William J. (2006), ‘In Search of Monsters: Realism and Progress in International Relations Theory after September 11,’ *Security Studies*, 15(3): 496–528.
- Bromley, Simon (2011), ‘The Limits to Balancing,’ *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 24(2): 129–134.
- Brooks, Stephen G. (1997), ‘Dueling Realisms,’ *International Organization*, (Summer) 51(3): 445–477.



## 22 Introduction

- Brooks, Stephen G. and William C. Wohlforth (2000/2001), 'Power, Globalization and the End of the Cold War: Reevaluating a Landmark Case for Ideas,' *International Security*, 25(3): 5–53.
- Brooks, Stephen G. and William C. Wohlforth (2003), 'Economic constraints and the end of the Cold War,' in William C. Wohlforth (ed.) *Cold War Endgame: Oral History, Analysis, Constraints*. State College (PA: Pennsylvania State University Press), pp. 273–312.
- Brooks, Stephen G. and William C. Wohlforth (2004), 'Economic Constraints and the Turn Toward Superpower Cooperation in the 1980s,' in O. Njølstad (ed.) *The Last Decade of the Cold War: From Conflict Escalation to Conflict Transformation: The Cold War in the 1980s* (London: Frank Cass), pp. 83–118.
- Brooks, Stephen G. and William C. Wohlforth (2007), 'Clarifying the End of the Cold War debate,' *Cold War History*, 7(3): 447–454.
- Brooks, Stephen G. and William C. Wohlforth (2008), *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press).
- Brooks, Stephen G. and William C. Wohlforth (2011), 'Assessing the Balance,' *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 24(2): 201–219.
- Butterfield, Herbert (1951), *History and Human Relations* (London: Collins).
- Butterfield, Herbert (1953), *Christianity, Diplomacy and War* (London: Epworth Press).
- Butterfield, Herbert (1966), 'The Balance of Power,' in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (eds) *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 132–148.
- Buzan, Barry (1993), 'From International System to International Society: Structural Realism and Regime Theory Meet the English School,' *International Organization*, 47(3): 327–352.
- Buzan, Barry (2004), *From International to World Society? English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalisation* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- Buzan, Barry, Charles Jones, and Richard Little (1993), *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press).
- Carr, Edward Hallett (1939/1946), *The Twenty Years' Crisis: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (New York: St. Martin's Press).
- Christensen, Thomas J. (1996), *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–1958* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
- Christensen, Thomas J. (2006), 'Fostering Stability or Creating a Monster? The Rise of China and U.S. Policy toward East Asia,' *International Security*, 31(1): 81–126.
- Christensen, Thomas J. and Jack Snyder (1990), 'Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity,' *International Organization*, 44(2): 137–168.
- Clark, Ian (2005), *Legitimacy in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Clark, Ian (2007), *International Legitimacy and World Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Claude, Inis (1962), *Power and International Relations* (New York: Random House).
- Clinton, W. David (ed.) (2007), *The Realist Tradition and Contemporary International Relations* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press).
- Copeland, Dale (2000), 'The Constructivist Challenge to Structural Realism: A Review Essay,' *International Security*, 25(2): 187–212.
- Copeland, Dale (2001), *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
- Copeland, Dale (2003), 'A Realist Critique of the English School,' *Review of International Studies*, 29: 427–441.
- Deudney, Daniel and G. John Ikenberry (2012), 'The End of the Cold War After 20 Years: Reconsiderations, Retrospectives and Revisions,' *International Politics*, 48(4/5): 435–440.
- Deutsch, Karl and J. David Singer (1964), 'Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability,' *World Politics*, 16(3): 390–406.
- DiCicco, Jonathan M. and Jack S. Levy (1999), 'Power Shifts and Problem Shifts: The Evolution of the Power Transition Research Program,' *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 43(6): 675–704.
- DiCicco, Jonathan M. and Jack S. Levy (2003), 'The Power Transition Research Program: A Lakatosian Analysis,' in Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (eds) *Progress in International Relations Theory: Appraising the Field*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), pp. 109–157.

- Donnelly, Jack (1995), 'Realism and International Relations,' in James Farr, John S. Dryzek, and Stephen T. Leonard (eds) *Political Science in History* (New York: Cambridge University Press), pp. 175–197.
- Donnelly, Jack (2000), *Realism and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Doran, Charles F. (1983), 'War and Power Dynamics: Economic Underpinnings,' *International Studies Quarterly*, 27(4): 419–441.
- Doran, Charles F. (1989), 'Systemic Disequilibrium, Foreign Policy Role, and the Power Cycle: Challenges for Research Design,' *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 33(3): 371–401.
- Doran, Charles F. (2000), 'Confronting the Principles of the Power Cycle: Changing Systems Structure, Expectations, and War,' in Manus I. Midlarsky (ed.) *Handbook of War Studies II* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press), pp. 332–368.
- Doran, Charles F. and Wes Parsons (1980), 'War and the Cycle of Relative Power,' *American Political Science Review*, 74(4): 947–965.
- Drezner, Daniel W. (2011), 'China Isn't Beating the U.S.,' *Foreign Policy*, (January/February) 184: 67.
- Dueck, Colin (2006), *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
- Dunne, Tim (1998), *Inventing International Society: A History of the English School* (New York: St. Martin's Press).
- Elman, Colin (1996a), 'Horses for Courses: Why *Not* Neorealist Theories of Foreign Policy?' *Security Studies*, 6(1): 7–53.
- Elman, Colin (1996b), 'Cause, Effect, and Consistency: A Response to Kenneth Waltz,' *Security Studies*, 6(1): 58–61.
- Elman, Colin (2001), 'History, Theory and the Democratic Peace,' *The International History Review*, 23(4): 757–766.
- Elman, Colin (2003), 'Introduction: Appraising Balance of Power Theory,' in John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman (eds.) *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall), pp. 1–22.
- Elman, Colin (2004), 'Extending Offensive Realism: The Louisiana Purchase and America's Rise to Regional Hegemony,' *American Political Science Review*, 98(4): 563–576.
- Elman, Colin (2005a), 'Explanatory Typologies in Qualitative Studies of International Politics,' *International Organization*, 59(2): 293–326.
- Elman, Colin (2005b), 'Realism,' in Martin Griffiths (ed.) *Routledge Encyclopedia of International Relations and Global Politics* (London: Routledge), pp. 707–713.
- Elman, Colin (2007), 'Realism,' in Martin Griffiths (ed.) *International Relations Theory for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge), pp. 11–20.
- Elman, Colin (2008), 'Realism,' in Paul D. Williams (ed.) *Security Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge), pp. 15–28.
- Elman, Colin and Miriam Fendius Elman (1995), 'Correspondence: History vs. Neo-realism: A Second Look,' *International Security*, 20(1): 182–193.
- Elman, Colin and Fendius Elman, Miriam (2002), 'How Not to Be Lakatos Intolerant: Appraising Progress in IR Research,' *International Studies Quarterly*, 46(2): 231–262.
- Elman Colin and Miriam Fendius Elman (eds) (2003), *Progress in International Relations Theory: Appraising the Field* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).
- Elman, Colin and Michael A. Jensen (2012), 'Realisms,' in Paul D. Williams (ed.) *Security Studies: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge), pp. 15–31.
- Elman, Miriam Fendius (1997), *Paths to Peace: Is Democracy the Answer?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).
- Erskine, Toni and Richard Ned Lebow (eds) (2012), *Tragedy and International Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan).
- Farber, Henry S. and Joanne Gowa (1995), 'Politics and Peace,' *International Security*, 20(2): 123–146.
- Fearon, James (1998), 'Domestic Politics, Foreign Policy, and Theories of International Relations,' *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1: 289–313.



## 24 Introduction

- Feaver, Peter D., Gunther Hellmann, Randall L. Schweller, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, William C. Wohlforth, Jeffrey W. Legro, and Andrew Moravcsik (2000), 'Correspondence: Brother, Can You Spare a Paradigm? (Or Was Anybody Ever a Realist?)', *International Security*, 25(1): 165–169.
- Frankel, Benjamin (ed.) (1997a), *Roots of Realism* (Routledge).
- Frankel, Benjamin (ed.) (1997b), *Realism: Restatements and Renewal* (Routledge).
- Fravel, M. Taylor (2010), 'International Relations Theory and China's Rise: Assessing China's Potential for Territorial Expansion,' *International Studies Review*, 12(4): 505–532.
- Freyberg-Inan, Annette, Ewan Harrison, and Patrick James (eds) (2009), *Rethinking Realism in International Relations: Between Tradition and Innovation* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press).
- Friedberg, Aaron L. (2005), 'The Future of U.S.–China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?' *International Security*, 30(2): 7–45.
- Garst, Daniel (1989), 'Thucydides and Neorealism,' *International Studies Quarterly*, 33(1): 3–27.
- Gilpin, Robert (1981), *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- Gilpin, Robert (1988), 'The Theory of Hegemonic War,' *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 18(4): 591–613.
- Glaser, Charles L. (1994/95), 'Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help,' *International Security*, 19(3): 50–90.
- Glaser, Charles L. (1997), 'The Security Dilemma Revisited,' *World Politics*, 50(1): 171–210.
- Glaser, Charles L. (2003a), 'The Necessary and Natural Evolution of Structural Realism,' in John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman (eds) *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall), pp. 266–279.
- Glaser, Charles L. (2003b), 'Structural Realism in a More Complex World,' *Review of International Studies*, 29: 403–414.
- Glaser, Charles L. (2010). *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Glaser, Charles L. (2011), 'Why Unipolarity Doesn't Matter (Much),' *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 24(2): 135–147.
- Grieco, Joseph M. (1988), 'Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism,' *International Organization*, 42(3): 485–508.
- Grieco, Joseph M., Robert Powell and Duncan Snidal (1993), 'The Relative-Gains Problem for International Cooperation,' *American Political Science Review*, 87(3): 729–743.
- Griffiths, Martin (1992), *Realism, Idealism and International Politics: A Reinterpretation* (New York, NY: Routledge).
- Gulick, Edward Vose (1955/1967), *Europe's Classical Balance of Power* (New York: W.W. Norton).
- Guzzini, Stefano (1998), *Realism in International Relations and International Political Economy: The Continuing Story of a Death Foretold* (New York: Routledge).
- Haslam, Jonathan (2002), *No Virtue Like Necessity: Realist Thought in International Relations since Machiavelli* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).
- Herz, John H. (1950), 'Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma,' *World Politics*, 2(2): 157–180.
- Hoffmann, Stanley and David P. Fidler (eds) (1991), *Rousseau on International Relations* (Oxford University Press).
- Hopf, Ted (1991), 'Polarity, the Offense–Defense Balance, and War,' *American Political Science Review*, 85(2): 475–493.
- Ikenberry, G. John, Michael Mastanduno, and William C. Wohlforth (2011), *International Relations Theory and the Consequences of Unipolarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- James, Patrick (2002), *International Relations and Scientific Progress: Structural Realism Reconsidered* (Ohio State University Press).
- Jervis, Robert (1997), *Systems Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
- Jervis, Robert (1998), 'Realism in the Study of World Politics,' *International Organization*, 52(4): 971–991.

- Jervis, Robert (2002), 'Theories of War in an Era of Leading-Power Peace: Presidential Address, American Political Science Association,' *American Political Science Review*, 96(1): 1–14.
- Jervis, Robert L. and Jack Snyder (eds) (1991), *Dominoes and Bandwagons* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Joffe, Josef (2009), 'The Default Power: The False Prophecy of America's Decline,' *Foreign Affairs*, (September/October) 88(5): 21–35.
- Kaufman, Stuart J., Richard Little, and William C. Wohlforth (eds) (2007), *The Balance of Power in World History* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan).
- Kahler, Miles (1997), 'Inventing International Relations: International Relations Theory After 1945,' in Michael W. Doyle and G. John Ikenberry (eds) *New Thinking in International Relations Theory* (Boulder, CO: Westview), pp. 20–53.
- Kennan, George F. (1951), *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- Keohane, Robert O. (1984), *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Keohane, Robert O. (ed.) (1986), *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press).
- Keohane, Robert O. and Lisa Martin (2003), 'Institutional Theory as a Research Program,' in Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (eds) *Progress in International Relations Theory* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press), pp. 71–107.
- Keohane, Robert O. and Joseph Nye, Jr. (1977), *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little, Brown).
- Kim, Woosang (1991), 'Alliance Transitions and Great Power War,' *American Journal of Political Science*, 35(4): 833–850.
- Kim, Woosang (1992), 'Power Transitions and Great Power War from Westphalia to Waterloo,' *World Politics*, 45(1): 153–172.
- Kim, Woosang (1996), 'Power Parity, Alliances, and War from 1648 to 1975,' in Jacek Kugler and Douglas Lemke (eds) *Parity and War* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press), pp. 93–105.
- Kim, Woosang (2002), 'Power Parity, Alliance, Dissatisfaction, and Wars in East Asia, 1860–1993,' *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 46(5): 654–671.
- Kirshner, Jonathan D. (2012), 'The Tragedy of Offensive Realism: Classical Realism and the Rise of China,' *European Journal of International Relations*, 18(1): 53–75.
- Kugler, Jacek and Douglas Lemke (eds) (1996), *Parity and War: Evaluations and Extensions of the War Ledger* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Michigan University Press).
- Kugler, Jacek and Douglas Lemke (2000), 'The Power Transition Research Program: Assessing Theoretical and Empirical Advances,' in Manus I. Midlarsky (ed.) *The Handbook of War Studies II* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Michigan University Press), pp. 129–163.
- Kugler, Jacek and A.F.K. Organski (1989), 'The Power Transition: A Retrospective and Prospective Evaluation,' in Manus I. Midlarsky (ed.) *Handbook of War Studies* (Boston: Unwin Hyman), pp. 171–194.
- Kupchan, Charles. A. (2011), 'The False Promise of Unipolarity: Constraints on the Exercise of American Power,' *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 24(2): 165–173.
- Kydd, Andrew H. (2005), *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Labs, Eric J. (1997), 'Beyond Victory: Offensive Realism and the Expansion of War Aims,' *Security Studies*, 6(4): 1–49.
- Lakatos, Imre (1970), 'Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes,' in Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (eds.) *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (New York: Cambridge University Press), pp. 91–196.
- Layne, Christopher (1993), 'The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Arise,' *International Security*, 17(4): 5–51.
- Layne, Christopher (1994), 'Kant or Cant: The Myth of the Democratic Peace,' *International Security*, 19(2): 5–49.
- Layne, Christopher (2006a), *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).

## 26 Introduction

- Layne, Christopher (2006b), 'The Unipolar Illusion Revisited: The Coming End of the United States' Unipolar Moment,' *International Security*, 31(2): 7–41.
- Layne, Christopher (2009), 'The Waning of U.S. Hegemony—Myth or Reality?' *International Security*, (Summer) 34(1): 147–172.
- Layne, Christopher (2011), 'The Unipolar Exit: Beyond the *Pax Americana*,' *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 24(2): 149–164.
- Lebow, Richard Ned (1994), 'The Long Peace, the End of the Cold War, and the Failure of Realism,' *International Organization*, 48(2): 249–277.
- Legro, Jeffrey W. (2007), 'What China Will Want: The Future Intentions of a Rising Power,' *Perspectives on Politics*, 5(3): 515–534.
- Legro, Jeffrey W. (2011), 'The Mix that Makes Unipolarity: Hegemonic Purpose and International Constraints,' *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 24(2): 185–199.
- Legro, Jeffrey W. and Andrew Moravcsik (1999), 'Is Anybody Still a Realist?' *International Security*, 24(2): 5–55.
- Lemke, Douglas (1995), 'Toward a General Understanding of Parity and War,' *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 14: 143–162.
- Lemke, Douglas (1996), 'Small States and War: An Expansion of Power Transition Theory,' in Jacek Kugler and Douglas Lemke (eds.) *Parity and War* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press), pp. 77–91.
- Liberman, Peter (1993), 'The Spoils of Conquest,' *International Security*, 18(2): 125–153.
- Lieber, Robert J. (2012), *Power and Willpower in the American Future: Why the United States is Not Destined to Decline* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- Linklater, Andrew and Hidemi Suganami (2006), *The English School of International Relations: A Contemporary Reassessment* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- Little, Richard (2003), 'The English School vs. American Realism: A Meeting of Minds or Divided by a Common Language?' *Review of International Studies*, 29: 443–460.
- Little, Richard (2007), *The Balance of Power in International Relations: Metaphors, Myths and Models* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- Lobell, Steven E. (2009), 'Threat Assessment, the State, and Foreign Policy: A Neoclassical Realist Model,' in Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro (eds) *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press), pp. 42–74.
- Lobell, Steven E., Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro (eds) (2009), *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- Luard, Evan (1992), *The Balance of Power: The System of International Relations 1648–1815* (London: MacMillan).
- Luttwak, Edward (2008), 'The Declinists, Wrong Again,' *American Interest*, (November/December) 4(2): pp. 7–13.
- Lynn-Jones, Sean M. (1995), 'Offense–Defense Theory and Its Critics,' *Security Studies*, 4(4): 660–691.
- Lynn-Jones, Sean M. (2001), *Does Offense–Defense Theory Have a Future?* (Working Paper, Research Group in International Security, Université de Montréal).
- Mansfield, Edward D. (1993), 'Concentration, Polarity, and the Distribution of Power,' *International Studies Quarterly*, 37(1): 105–128.
- Mearsheimer, John J. (1990), 'Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War,' *International Security*, 15: 5–56.
- Mearsheimer, John J. (1994/95), 'The False Promise of International Institutions,' *International Security*, 19(3): 5–49.
- Mearsheimer, John J. (2001), *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton).
- Mearsheimer, John J. (2006), 'China's Unpeaceful Rise,' *Current History*, 105(690): 160–162.
- Milner, Helen (1991), 'The Assumption of Anarchy in International Relations Theory,' *Review of International Studies*, 17: 67–85.

- Modelski, George (1978), 'The Long Cycle of Global Politics and the Nation-State,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 20(2): 214–235.
- Modelski, George and Patrick M. Morgan (1985), 'Understanding Global War,' *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 29(3): 391–417.
- Moravcsik, Andrew (1997), 'Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics,' *International Organization*, 51(4): 513–553.
- Morgenthau, Hans (1948), *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 1st edition (New York: A. A. Knopf).
- Morgenthau, Hans (1985), *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6th edition (New York: McGraw-Hill).
- Navari, Cornelia (ed.) (2009), *Theorising International Society: English School Methods* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan).
- Nexon, Daniel H. (2009), 'Review Article: The Balance of Power in the Balance,' *World Politics*, (April) 61(2): 330–359.
- Nicolson, Harold (1939), *Diplomacy* (London: Oxford University Press).
- Niebuhr, Reinhold (1940), *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York: Scribner's).
- Organski, A.F.K. (1958), *World Politics*, 1st edition (New York: Knopf).
- Organski, A.F.K. (1968a), *World Politics*, 2nd edition (New York: Knopf).
- Organski, A.F.K. (1968b), 'Power Transition,' in David L. Sills (ed.) *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 12 (New York: The Macmillan Company and The Free Press), pp. 415–18.
- Organski, A.F.K. and Jacek Kugler (1980), *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- Owen, John M. (1994), 'How Liberalism Produces the Democratic Peace,' *International Security*, 19(2): 87–125.
- Owen, John M. (2000), *Liberal Peace, Liberal War: American Politics and International Security* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
- Pape, Robert (2005), 'Soft Balancing against the United States,' *International Security*, 30(1): 7–45.
- Pape, Robert A. (2009), 'Empire Falls,' *National Interest*, (January/February) 99: 21–34.
- Paul, T.V. (2005), 'Soft Balancing in the Age of U.S. Primacy,' *International Security*, 30(1): 46–71.
- Paul, T.V., James Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann (eds) (2004), *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press).
- Posen, Barry (1993), 'The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict,' *Survival*, 35(1): 27–47.
- Posen, Barry (2006), 'European Union Security and Defense Policy: A Response to Unipolarity?' *Security Studies*, 15(2): 149–186.
- Powell, Robert (1991), 'Absolute and Relative Gains in International Relations Theory,' *American Political Science Review*, 85(4): 1303–1320.
- Rachman, Gideon (2011), 'American Decline: This Time It's for Real,' *Foreign Policy*, (January/February) 184: 59–65.
- Rasler, Karen and William R. Thompson (1983), 'Global Wars, Public Debts, and the Long Cycle,' *World Politics*, 35(4): 489–516.
- Rasler, Karen and William R. Thompson (1985), 'War Making and State Making: Government Expenditures, Tax Revenues, and Global Wars,' *American Political Science Review*, 79(2): 491–507.
- Rasler, Karen and William R. Thompson (1991), 'Technological Innovation, Capability Positional Shifts, and Systemic War,' *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 35(3): 412–442.
- Rasler, Karen and William R. Thompson (1994), *The Great Powers and Global Struggle, 1490–1990* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky).
- Rasler, Karen and William R. Thompson (2000), 'Global War and the Political Economy of Structural Change,' in Manus I. Midlarsky (ed.) *The Handbook of War Studies II* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Michigan University Press), pp. 301–331.
- Rasler, Karen and William R. Thompson (2001), 'Malign Autocracies and Major Power Warfare: Evil, Tragedy, and International Relations Theory,' *Security Studies*, 10(3): 46–79.
- Rathbun, Brian C. (2010), 'Is Anybody Not an (International Relations) Liberal?' *Security Studies*, 19(1): 2–25.

## 28 Introduction

- Ray, James Lee (2003), 'A Lakatosian View of the Democratic Peace Research Program,' in Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (eds.) *Progress in International Relations Theory* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press), pp. 205–243.
- RIS editors (2003), 'American Realism and the Real World,' *Review of International Studies* 29: 401–402.
- Rosato, Sebastian (2003), 'The Flawed Logic of the Democratic Peace Theory,' *American Political Science Review*, 97(4): 585–602.
- Rose, Gideon (1998), 'Review: Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,' *World Politics*, 51(1): 144–172.
- Rosecrance, Richard (2003), 'Is There a Balance of Power?' in John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman, *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall), pp. 154–165.
- Rousseau, David L. (2002), 'Motivations for Choice: The Salience of Relative Gains in International Politics,' *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 46(3): 394–426.
- Rummel, R.J. (1995), 'Democracies ARE Less Warlike Than Other Regimes,' *European Journal of International Relations*, 1: 457–479.
- Russett, Bruce (1993), *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
- Sabrosky, Alan (ed.) (1985), *Polarity and War: The Changing Structure of International Conflict* (Boulder, CO: Westview).
- Schwarzenberger, Georg (1941), *Power Politics* (New York: Praeger).
- Schweller, Randall L. (1994), 'Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In,' *International Security*, 19(1): 72–107.
- Schweller, Randall L. (1996), 'Neorealism's Status-Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?' *Security Studies*, 5(3): 90–121.
- Schweller, Randall L. (2006), *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
- Schweller, Randall L. (2009), 'Neoclassical Realism and State Mobilization: Expansionist Ideology in the Age of Mass Politics,' in Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro (eds) *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press), pp. 227–250.
- Schweller, Randall L. (2011), 'The Future is Uncertain and the End is Always Near,' *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 24(2): 175–184.
- Schweller, Randall L. and William C. Wohlforth (2000), 'Power Test: Updating Realism in Response to the End of the Cold War,' *Security Studies* 9(3): 60–108.
- Seabury, Paul (1965), *Balance of Power* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co.).
- Shuman, Frederick (1933), *International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill).
- Simms, Brendan (2011), 'Introduction: World Out of Balance,' *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, (June) 24(2): 119–120.
- Smith, Michael Joseph (1986), *Realist Thought From Weber to Kissinger* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press).
- Snidal, Duncan (1991a), 'International Cooperation Among Relative Gains Maximizers,' *International Studies Quarterly*, 35(4): 387–402.
- Snidal, Duncan (1991b), 'Relative Gains and the Pattern of International Cooperation,' *American Political Science Review*, 85(3): 701–726.
- Snyder, Glenn H. (2002), 'Mearsheimer's World—Offensive Realism and the Struggle for Security,' *International Security*, (Summer) 27(1): 149–173.
- Snyder, Jack L. (1991), *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
- Spirtas, Michael (1996), 'A House Divided: Tragedy and Evil in Realist Theory,' *Security Studies*, 5(3): 385–423.
- Sterling-Folker, Jennifer (2009), 'Neoclassical Realism and Identity: Peril Despite Profit Across the Taiwan Strait,' in Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro (eds) *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press), pp. 99–138.



- Subramanian, Arvind (2011), 'The Inevitable Superpower: Why China's Rise is a Sure Thing,' *Foreign Affairs*, (September/October) 90(5): 66–78.
- Taliaferro, Jeffrey W. (2004), *Balancing Risks: Great Power Intervention in the Periphery* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
- Taliaferro, Jeffrey W. (2006), 'State Building for Future Wars: Neoclassical Realism and the Resource-Extractive State,' *Security Studies*, 15(3): 464–495.
- Thompson, William R. (1983), 'Uneven Economic Growth, Systemic Challenges, and Global Wars,' *International Studies Quarterly*, 27(3): 341–355.
- Thompson, William R. (1986), 'Polarity, the Long Cycle, and Global Power Warfare,' *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 30(4): 587–615.
- Thompson, William R. (1990), 'Long Waves, Technological Innovation, and Relative Decline,' *International Organization*, 44(2): 201–233.
- Van Evera, Stephen (1999), *Causes of War: Vol. I: The Structure of Power and the Roots of War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
- Vasquez, John A. (1997), 'The Realist Paradigm and Degenerative versus Progressive Research Programs: An Appraisal of Neotraditional Research on Waltz's Balancing Proposition,' *American Political Science Review*, 91(4): 899–912.
- Vasquez, John A. and Colin Elman (eds) (2003), *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall).
- Voeten, Erik (2011), 'Unipolar Politics as Usual,' *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 24(2): 121–128.
- Walt, Stephen M. (1987), *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
- Walt, Stephen M. (1988), 'Testing Theories of Alliance Formation: The Case of Southwest Asia,' *International Organization*, 42(2): 275–316.
- Walt, Stephen M. (1991), 'Alliance Formation in Southwest Asia: Balancing and Bandwagoning in Cold War Competition,' in Robert Jervis and Jack Snyder (eds) *Dominoes and Bandwagons* (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 51–84.
- Walt, Stephen M. (1992a), 'Revolution and War,' *World Politics*, 44(3): 321–368.
- Walt, Stephen M. (1992b), 'Alliances, Threats, and U.S. Grand Strategy: A Reply to Kaufman and Labs,' *Security Studies*, 1(3): 448–482.
- Walt, Stephen M. (1996), *Revolution and War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
- Walt, Stephen M. (2000), 'Containing Rogues and Renegades: Coalition Strategies and Counterproliferation,' in Victor A. Utgoff (ed.) *The Coming Crisis: Nuclear Proliferation, U.S. Interests and World Order* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), pp. 191–226.
- Walt, Stephen M. (2002), 'The Enduring Relevance of the Realist Tradition,' in Ira Katznelson and Helen V. Milner (eds) *Political Science: State of the Discipline* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co.), pp. 197–230.
- Walt, Stephen M. (2006), *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: W.W. Norton).
- Waltz, Kenneth N. (1979), *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley).
- Waltz, Kenneth N. (1993), 'The Emerging Structure of International Politics,' *International Security*, 18(2): 44–79.
- Waltz, Kenneth N. (1996), 'International Politics is Not Foreign Policy,' *Security Studies*, 6(1): 54–57.
- Wang, Yuan-kang (2004), 'Offensive Realism and the Rise of China,' *Issues and Studies*, 40(1): 173–201.
- Wayman, Frank (1984), 'Bipolarity and War: The Role of Capability Concentration and Alliance Patterns Among Major Powers, 1816–1965,' *Journal of Peace Research*, 21(1): 25–42.
- Wayman, Frank W. and Paul F. Diehl (1994), *Reconstructing Realpolitik* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press).
- Wendt, Alexander (1992), 'Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics,' *International Organization*, 46(2): 391–425.
- Wendt, Alexander (1999), *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

### 30 Introduction

- Wendt, Alexander (2000), 'On the Via Media: A Response to the Critics,' *Review of International Studies*, 26(1): 165–180.
- Wight, Martin (1946), *Power Politics* (Looking Forward Pamphlet No. 8. London: Royal Institute of International Affairs).
- Williams, Michael C. (2005), *The Realist Tradition and the Limits of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Wivel, Anders (2005), 'Explaining Why State X Made a Certain Move Last Tuesday: The Promise and Limitations of Realist Foreign Policy Analysis,' *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 8(4): 355–380.
- Wohlforth, William C. (1993), *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions during the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
- Wohlforth, William C. (1994–1995), 'Realism and the End of the Cold War,' *International Security*, 19(3): 91–129.
- Wohlforth, William C. (1996), 'Ending the Cold War: The Search for Causes,' in William C. Wohlforth (ed.) *Witnesses to the End of the Cold War* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press).
- Wohlforth, William C. (1998), 'Reality Check: Revising Theories of International Relations in Response to the End of the Cold War,' *World Politics*, 50(4): 659–680.
- Wohlforth, William C. (1999), 'The Stability of a Unipolar World,' *International Security*, 24(1): 5–41.
- Wohlforth, William C. (2001), 'Historical Science and Cold War Scholarship,' in Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (eds) *Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Study of International Relations* (Cambridge: MIT Press).
- Wohlforth, William C. (2002), 'Measuring Power—And the Power of Theories,' in John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman (eds) *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall).
- Wohlforth, William C. (2003), *Cold War Endgame: Oral History, Analysis, Debates* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press).
- Wohlforth, William C. (2005), 'The End of the Cold War as a Hard Case for Ideas,' *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 7(2): 165–173.
- Wohlforth, William C. (2012), 'No One Loves a Realist Explanation,' *International Politics*, 48(4/5): 441–459.
- Wolfers, Arnold (1962), *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press).
- Zakaria, Fareed (1998), *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).



## **Section One**

# **Realist research programs**

This page intentionally left blank

## 2 Classical realism

### The twentieth century

Classical realism emerged as a distinct approach to the study of international relations during the interwar years, and for a time after the Second World War was the dominant perspective in the United States. It was viewed as a counterweight to liberalism (sometimes referred to as utopianism or idealism) in academic and policy-making circles. Classical realists, including E.H. Carr, Reinhold Niebuhr, Hans Morgenthau, and George Kennan, adopted positions that contradicted their liberal counterparts. While liberals allowed for human perfectibility, classical realists warned of an innate human lust for power and domination. While liberals encouraged the achievement of common goals, classical realists viewed pursuing a selfish national interest as the only prudent and rational policy. While liberals preached the possibility of human progress through education and internationalism, classical realists focused on the unchanging and conflictual nature of international relations.

The scholarly tradition commonly referred to as “classical realism” is not a cohesive research program in the modern sense, with a core set of assumptions and clearly articulated theories. The label identifies a family resemblance among a group of early and mid-twentieth-century scholarship that shared certain common themes. These include the quest for power, the inevitability of conflict, flawed human nature, and the recurrence of balance of power. Viewed as a group, classical realists appear as an eclectic mix of authors, writing on a variety of topics and often disagreeing on the driving forces behind international politics. Both the common themes and the eclecticism are nicely captured in the readings that are included in this chapter.

The excerpts from E.H. Carr’s seminal *The Twenty Years’ Crisis* lay out the author’s views on the science of international politics, and include the realist critique of the liberal, or utopian, approach. For Carr, while a hopeful vision is first necessary to motivate attention, scientific progress is then only possible once the utopian’s desires for a better world are supplemented with the “hard” and “ruthless” facts of power and interest that the realist uncovers. Carr provides a strong critique of liberalism, showing how its core tenets—the harmony of interests, internationalism, and the universal good—reflect the selfish interests of the most powerful nations seeking to maintain their dominance.

The chapter continues with selections from two volumes by Hans J. Morgenthau, the dominant figure in realist international relations after the Second World War, and still considered by many to be the archetypal realist. In *Scientific Man*, Morgenthau provides two reasons why egotistical individuals are destined to be in conflict: a selfish wish to possess or to keep the things that others want or have; and what Morgenthau calls the *animus dominandi*, the limitless desire for power. The lust for power finds a particularly virulent expression in politics. The state acts as a medium through which an appetite for power is satisfied, as well as a justification for its unrestricted pursuit. Power politics inevitably follow. Rather than

bemoan this situation, Morgenthau instead offers a quintessentially realist answer: do the best in the circumstances you must face, which means be as good at power politics as you can.

In *Politics Among Nations*, one of the most important realist texts, Morgenthau reformulates his *animus dominandi* treatise into a rational theory of international politics. The selection in this chapter lays out his six principles of political realism, which include a discussion of Morgenthau's conception of "interest defined in terms of power." Morgenthau also questions the extent to which morality should guide foreign policy, arguing instead that prudence is the supreme virtue in politics. By applying Morgenthau's six principles, political realism not only aptly explains the actions of statesmen, but also provides a blueprint for the achievement of normative goals.

Representing classical realism's diversity, the selections by John Herz and Arnold Wolfers mark a break from Morgenthau's human nature-based explanation of international politics. The authors describe how situational dynamics, not human failings, often force states into competition and conflict, even when they only desire security. Herz introduces the concept of the "security dilemma," which remains a central part of the realist tradition. As groups (including states) seek to make themselves more secure by becoming more powerful, they simultaneously make other groups less safe. The threatened groups respond, and a competitive cycle is created, even though none of the actors wishes to do the others any harm. Wolfers describes how situational dynamics can differ depending on a range of state goals, including self-extension, self-preservation, and self-abnegation. With their stress on situational dynamics, the writings of Herz and Wolfers can be seen as a link between the human nature *animus dominandi* school of Morgenthau and Niebuhr to more recent versions of realism. Represented by scholars like Waltz and Mearsheimer, these structural varieties have since come to dominate the realist tradition.

# The beginnings of a science

*Edward Hallett Carr*

From: *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper, 1964), Chapter 1.

The science of international politics is in its infancy. Down to 1914, the conduct of international relations was the concern of persons professionally engaged in it. In democratic countries, foreign policy was traditionally regarded as outside the scope of party politics; and the representative organs did not feel themselves competent to exercise any close control over the mysterious operations of foreign offices. In Great Britain, public opinion was readily aroused if war occurred in any region traditionally regarded as a sphere of British interest, or if the British navy momentarily ceased to possess that margin of superiority over potential rivals which was then deemed essential. In continental Europe, conscription and the chronic fear of foreign invasion had created a more general and continuous popular awareness of international problems. But this awareness found expression mainly in the labour movement, which from time to time passed somewhat academic resolutions against war. The constitution of the United States of America contained the unique provision that treaties were concluded by the President “by and with the advice and consent of the Senate”. But the foreign relations of the United States seemed too parochial to lend any wider significance to this exception. The more picturesque aspects of diplomacy had a certain news value. But nowhere, whether in universities or in wider intellectual circles, was there organised study of current international affairs. War was still regarded mainly as the business of soldiers; and the corollary of this was that international politics were the business of diplomats. There was no general desire to take the conduct of international affairs out of the hands of the professionals or even to pay serious and systematic attention to what they were doing.

The war of 1914–18 made an end of the view that war is a matter which affects only professional soldiers and, in so doing, dissipated the corresponding impression that international politics could safely be left in the hands of professional diplomats. The campaign for the popularisation of international politics began in the English-speaking countries in the form of an agitation against secret treaties, which were attacked, on insufficient evidence, as one of the causes of the war. The blame for the secret treaties should have been imputed, not to the wickedness of the governments, but to the indifference of the peoples. Everybody knew that such treaties were concluded. But before the war of 1914 few people felt any curiosity about them or thought them objectionable.<sup>1</sup> The agitation against them was, however, a fact of immense importance. It was the first symptom of the demand for the popularisation of international politics and heralded the birth of a new science.

### **Purpose and analysis in political science**

The science of international politics has, then, come into being in response to a popular demand. It has been created to serve a purpose and has, in this respect, followed the pattern of other sciences. At first sight, this pattern may appear illogical. Our first business, it will be said, is to collect, classify and analyse our facts and draw our inferences; and we shall then be ready to investigate the purpose to which our facts and our deductions can be put. The processes of the human mind do not, however, appear to develop in this logical order. The human mind works, so to speak, backwards. Purpose, which should logically follow analysis, is required to give it both its initial impulse and its direction. "If society has a technical need", wrote Engels, "it serves as a greater spur to the progress of science than do ten universities".<sup>2</sup> . . . Desire to cure the sicknesses of the body politic has given its impulse and its inspiration to political science. Purpose, whether we are conscious of it or not, is a condition of thought; and thinking for thinking's sake is as abnormal and barren as the miser's accumulation of money for its own sake. "The wish is father to the thought" is a perfectly exact description of the origin of normal human thinking.

If this is true of the physical sciences, it is true of political science in a far more intimate sense. In the physical sciences, the distinction between the investigation of facts and the purpose to which the facts are to be put is not only theoretically valid, but is constantly observed in practice. The laboratory worker engaged in investigating the causes of cancer may have been originally inspired by the purpose of eradicating the disease. But this purpose is in the strictest sense irrelevant to the investigation and separable from it. His conclusion can be nothing more than a true report on facts. It cannot help to make the facts other than they are; for the facts exist independently of what anyone thinks about them. In the political sciences, which are concerned with human behaviour, there are no such facts. The investigator is inspired by the desire to cure some ill of the body politic. Among the causes of the trouble, he diagnoses the fact that human beings normally react to conditions in a certain way. But this is not a fact comparable with the fact that human bodies react in a certain way to certain drugs. It is a fact which may be changed by the desire to change it; and this desire, already present in the mind of the investigator, may be extended, as the result of his investigation, to a sufficient number of other human beings to make it effective. The purpose is not, as in the physical sciences, irrelevant to the investigation and separable from it: it is itself one of the facts. In theory, the distinction may no doubt still be drawn between the role of the investigator who establishes the facts and the role of the practitioner who considers the right course of action. In practice, one role shades imperceptibly into the other. Purpose and analysis become part and parcel of a single process . . .

### **The role of utopianism**

If therefore purpose precedes and conditions thought, it is not surprising to find that, when the human mind begins to exercise itself in some fresh field, an initial stage occurs in which the element of wish or purpose is overwhelmingly strong, and the inclination to analyse facts and means weak or nonexistent. Hobhouse notes as a characteristic of "the most primitive peoples" that "the evidence of the truth of an idea is not yet separate from the quality which renders it pleasant".<sup>3</sup> The same would appear to be conspicuously true of the primitive, or "utopian", stage of the political sciences. During this stage, the investigators will pay little attention to existing "facts" or to the analysis of cause and effect, but will devote themselves whole-heartedly to the elaboration of visionary projects for the attainment of the ends which

they have in view—projects whose simplicity and perfection give them an easy and universal appeal. It is only when these projects break down, and wish or purpose is shewn to be incapable by itself of achieving the desired end, that the investigators will reluctantly call in the aid of analysis, and the study, emerging from its infantile and utopian period, will establish its claim to be regarded as a science . . .

The teleological aspect of the science of international politics has been conspicuous from the outset. It took its rise from a great and disastrous war; and the overwhelming purpose which dominated and inspired the pioneers of the new science was to obviate a recurrence of this disease of the international body politic. The passionate desire to prevent war determined the whole initial course and direction of the study. Like other infant sciences, the science of international politics has been markedly and frankly utopian. It has been in the initial stage in which wishing prevails over thinking, generalisation over observation, and in which little attempt is made at a critical analysis of existing facts or available means. In this stage, attention is concentrated almost exclusively on the end to be achieved. The end has seemed so important that analytical criticism of the means proposed has too often been branded as destructive and unhelpful. When President Wilson, on his way to the Peace Conference, was asked by some of his advisers whether he thought his plan of a League of Nations would work, he replied briefly: "If it won't work, it must be made to work".<sup>4</sup> The advocate of a scheme for an international police force or for "collective security", or of some other project for an international order, generally replied to the critic not by an argument designed to shew how and why he thought his plan will work, but either by a statement that it must be made to work because the consequences of its failure to work would be so disastrous, or by a demand for some alternative nostrum.<sup>5</sup> This must be the spirit in which the alchemist or the utopian socialist would have answered the sceptic who questioned whether lead could be turned into gold or men made to live in model communities. Thought has been at a discount. Much that was said and written about international politics between 1919 and 1939 merited the stricture applied in another context by the economist Marshall, who compares "the nervous irresponsibility which conceives hasty utopian schemes" to the "bold facility of the weak player who will speedily solve the most difficult chess problem by taking on himself to move the black men as well as the white".<sup>6</sup> In extenuation of this intellectual failure, it may be said that, during the earlier of these years, the black pieces in international politics were in the hands of such weak players that the real difficulties of the game were scarcely manifest even to the keenest intelligence. The course of events after 1931 clearly revealed the inadequacy of pure aspiration as the basis for a science of international politics, and made it possible for the first time to embark on serious critical and analytical thought about international problems.

### **The impact of realism**

No science deserves the name until it has acquired sufficient humility not to consider itself omnipotent, and to distinguish the analysis of what is from aspiration about what should be. Because in the political sciences this distinction can never be absolute, some people prefer to withhold from them the right to the title of science. In both physical and political sciences, the point is soon reached where the initial stage of wishing must be succeeded by a stage of hard and ruthless analysis. The difference is that political sciences can never wholly emancipate themselves from utopianism, and that the political scientist is apt to linger for a longer initial period than the physical scientist in the utopian stage of development. This is perfectly natural. For while the transmutation of lead into gold would be no nearer if



everyone in the world passionately desired it, it is undeniable that if everyone really desired a “world-state” or “collective security” (and meant the same thing by those terms), it would be easily attained; and the student of international politics may be forgiven if he begins by supposing that his task is to make everyone desire it. It takes him some time to understand that no progress is likely to be made along this path, and that no political utopia will achieve even the most limited success unless it grows out of political reality. Having made the discovery, he will embark on that hard ruthless analysis of reality which is the hallmark of science; and one of the facts whose causes he will have to analyse is the fact that few people do desire a “world-state” or “collective security”, and that those who think they desire it mean different and incompatible things by it. He will have reached a stage when purpose by itself is seen to be barren, and when analysis of reality has forced itself upon him as an essential ingredient of his study.

The impact of thinking upon wishing which, in the development of a science, follows the breakdown of its first visionary projects, and marks the end of its specifically utopian period, is commonly called realism. Representing a reaction against the wish-dreams of the initial stage, realism is liable to assume a critical and somewhat cynical aspect. In the field of thought, it places its emphasis on the acceptance of facts and on the analysis of their causes and consequences. It tends to depreciate the role of purpose and to maintain, explicitly or implicitly, that the function of thinking is to study a sequence of events which it is powerless to influence or to alter. In the field of action, realism tends to emphasise the irresistible strength of existing forces and the inevitable character of existing tendencies, and to insist that the highest wisdom lies in accepting, and adapting oneself to, these forces and these tendencies. Such an attitude, though advocated in the name of “objective” thought, may no doubt be carried to a point where it results in the sterilisation of thought and the negation of action. But there is a stage where realism is the necessary corrective to the exuberance of utopianism, just as in other periods utopianism must be invoked to counteract the barrenness of realism. Immature thought is predominantly purposive and utopian. Thought which rejects purpose altogether is the thought of old age. Mature thought combines purpose with observation and analysis. Utopia and reality are thus the two facets of political science. Sound political thought and sound political life will be found only where both have their place.

## Notes

- 1 A recent historian of the Franco-Russian alliance, having recorded the protests of a few French radicals against the secrecy which enveloped this transaction, continues: “Parliament and opinion tolerated this complete silence, and were content to remain in absolute ignorance of the provisions and scope of the agreement” (Michon, *L’Alliance Franco-Russe*, p. 75). In 1898, in the Chamber of Deputies, Hanotaux was applauded for describing the disclosure of its terms as “absolutely impossible” (*ibid.* p. 82).
- 2 Quoted in Sidney Hook, *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx*, p. 279.
- 3 L. T. Hobhouse, *Development and Purpose*, p. 100.
- 4 R. S. Baker, *Woodrow Wilson and World Settlement*, i. p. 93.
- 5 “There is the old well-known story about the man who, during the Lisbon earthquake of 1775, went about hawking anti-earthquake pills; but one incident is forgotten—when someone pointed out that the pills could not possibly be of use, the hawker replied: ‘But what would you put in their place?’” (L. B. Namier, *In the Margin of History*, p. 20).
- 6 *Economic Journal* (1907), xvii. p. 9.

# The realist critique

*Edward Hallett Carr*

From: *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper, 1964), Chapter 5.

## The foundations of realism

... Machiavelli is the first important political realist. Machiavelli's starting-point is a revolt against the utopianism of current political thought:

It being my intention to write a thing which shall be useful to him who apprehends it, it appears to me more appropriate to follow up the real truth of a matter than the imagination of it; for many have pictured republics and principalities which in fact have never been seen and known, because how one lives is so far distant from how one ought to live that he who neglects what is done for what ought to be done sooner effects his ruin than his preservation.

The three essential tenets implicit in Machiavelli's doctrine are the foundation-stones of the realist philosophy. In the first place, history is a sequence of cause and effect, whose course can be analysed and understood by intellectual effort, but not (as the utopians believe) directed by "imagination". Secondly, theory does not (as the utopians assume) create practice, but practice theory. In Machiavelli's words, "good counsels, whencesoever they come, are born of the wisdom of the prince, and not the wisdom of the prince from good counsels". Thirdly, politics are not (as the utopians pretend) a function of ethics, but ethics of politics. Men "are kept honest by constraint". Machiavelli recognised the importance of morality, but thought that there could be no effective morality where there was no effective authority. Morality is the product of power . . .<sup>1</sup>

Modern realism differs, however, in one important respect from that of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Both utopianism and realism accepted and incorporated in their philosophies the eighteenth-century belief in progress, with the curious and somewhat paradoxical result that realism became in appearance more "progressive" than utopianism. Utopianism grafted its belief in progress on to its belief in an absolute ethical standard, which remained *ex hypothesi* static. Realism, having no such sheet-anchor, became more and more dynamic and relativist. Progress became part of the inner essence of the historical process; and mankind was moving forward towards a goal which was left undefined, or was differently defined by different philosophers. The "historical school" of realists had its home in Germany, and its development is traced through the great names of Hegel and Marx. But no country in Western Europe, and no branch of thought, was immune from its influence in the middle and later years of the nineteenth century; and this development, while it has freed realism from the pessimistic colouring imparted to it by thinkers like Machiavelli and Hobbes, has thrown its determinist character into stronger relief.

The idea of causation in history is as old as the writing of history itself. But so long as the belief prevailed that human affairs were subject to the continuous supervision and occasional intervention of a Divine Providence, no philosophy of history based on a regular relationship of cause and effect was likely to be evolved. The substitution of reason for Divine Providence enabled Hegel to produce, for the first time, a philosophy based on the conception of a rational historical process. Hegel, while assuming a regular and orderly process, was content to find its directing force in a metaphysical abstraction—the *Zeitgeist*. But once the historical conception of reality had established itself, it was a short step to substitute for the abstract *Zeitgeist* some concrete material force. The economic interpretation of history was not invented, but developed and popularised, by Marx. About the same time Buckle propounded a geographical interpretation of history which convinced him that human affairs were “permeated by one glorious principle of universal and undeviating regularity”;<sup>2</sup> and this has been revived in the form of the science of *Geopolitik*, whose inventor describes geography as “a political categorical imperative”.<sup>3</sup> Spengler believed that events were determined by quasi-biological laws governing the growth and decline of civilisations. More eclectic thinkers interpret history as the product of a variety of material factors, and the policy of a group or nation as a reflexion of all the material factors which make up the group or national interest. “Foreign policies”, said Mr. Hughes during his tenure of office as American Secretary of State, “are not built upon abstractions. They are the result of national interest arising from some immediate exigency or standing out vividly in historical perspective.”<sup>4</sup> Any such interpretation of reality, whether in terms of a *Zeitgeist*, or of economics or geography, or of “historical perspective”, is in its last analysis deterministic. Marx (though, having a programme of action, he could not be a rigid and consistent determinist) believed in “tendencies which work out with an iron necessity towards an inevitable goal”.<sup>5</sup> “Politics”, wrote Lenin, “have their own objective logic independent of the prescriptions of this or that individual or party.”<sup>6</sup> In January 1918, he described his belief in the coming socialist revolutions in Europe as “a scientific prediction”.<sup>7</sup>

On the “scientific” hypothesis of the realists, reality is thus identified with the whole course of historical evolution, whose laws it is the business of the philosopher to investigate and reveal. There can be no reality outside the historical process. “To conceive of history as evolution and progress”, writes Croce, “implies accepting it as necessary in all its parts, and therefore denying validity to judgments on it.”<sup>8</sup> Condemnation of the past on ethical grounds has no meaning; for in Hegel’s words, “philosophy transfigures the real which appears unjust into the rational”.<sup>9</sup> What was, is right. History cannot be judged except by historical standards. It is significant that our historical judgments, except those relating to a past which we can ourselves remember as the present, always appear to start from the presupposition that things could not have turned out otherwise than they did. It is recorded that Venizelos, on reading in Fisher’s *History of Europe* that the Greek invasion of Asia Minor in 1919 was a mistake, smiled ironically and said: “Every enterprise that does not succeed is a mistake”.<sup>10</sup> If Wat Tyler’s rebellion had succeeded, he would be an English national hero. If the American War of Independence had ended in disaster, the Founding Fathers of the United States would be briefly recorded in history as a gang of turbulent and unscrupulous fanatics. Nothing succeeds like success. “World history”, in the famous phrase which Hegel borrowed from Schiller, “is the world court”. The popular paraphrase “Might is Right” is misleading only if we attach too restricted a meaning to the word “Might”. History creates rights, and therefore right. The doctrine of the survival of the fittest proves that the survivor was, in fact, the fittest to survive. Marx does not seem to have maintained that the victory of the proletariat was just in any other sense than that it was historically inevitable. Lukacs was a consistent, though

perhaps indiscreet, Marxist when he based the “right” of the proletariat on its “historical mission”.<sup>11</sup> Hitler believed in the historical mission of the German people.

### **The relativity of thought**

The outstanding achievement of modern realism, however, has been to reveal, not merely the determinist aspects of the historical process, but the relative and pragmatic character of thought itself. In the last fifty years, thanks mainly though not wholly to the influence of Marx, the principles of the historical school have been applied to the analysis of thought; and the foundations of a new science have been laid, principally by German thinkers, under the name of the “sociology of knowledge”. The realist has thus been enabled to demonstrate that the intellectual theories and ethical standards of utopianism, far from being the expression of absolute and *a priori* principles, are historically conditioned, being both products of circumstances and interests and weapons framed for the furtherance of interests. “Ethical notions”, as Mr. Bertrand Russell has remarked, “are very seldom a cause, but almost always an effect, a means of claiming universal legislative authority for our own preferences, not, as we fondly imagine, the actual ground of those preferences.”<sup>12</sup> This is by far the most formidable attack which utopianism has to face; for here the very foundations of its belief are undermined by the realist critique . . .

### **National interest and the universal good**

. . . The weapon of the relativity of thought must be used to demolish the utopian concept of a fixed and absolute standard by which policies and actions can be judged. If theories are revealed as a reflexion of practice and principles of political needs, this discovery will apply to the fundamental theories and principles of the utopian creed, and not least to the doctrine of the harmony of interests which is its essential postulate.

It will not be difficult to shew that the utopian, when he preaches the doctrine of the harmony of interests, is innocently and unconsciously adopting Walewski’s maxim, and clothing his own interest in the guise of a universal interest for the purpose of imposing it on the rest of the world. “Men come easily to believe that arrangements agreeable to themselves are beneficial to others”, as Dicey observed,<sup>13</sup> and theories of the public good, which turn out on inspection to be an elegant disguise for some particular interest, are as common in international as in national affairs. The utopian, however eager he may be to establish an absolute standard, does not argue that it is the duty of his country, in conformity with that standard, to put the interest of the world at large before its own interest; for that would be contrary to his theory that the interest of all coincides with the interest of each. He argues that what is best for the world is best for his country, and then reverses the argument to read that what is best for his country is best for the world, the two propositions being, from the utopian standpoint, identical; and this unconscious cynicism of the contemporary utopian has proved a far more effective diplomatic weapon than the deliberate and self-conscious cynicism of a Walewski or a Bismarck. British writers of the past half-century have been particularly eloquent supporters of the theory that the maintenance of British supremacy is the performance of a duty to mankind. “If Great Britain has turned itself into a coal-shed and blacksmith’s forge”, remarked *The Times* ingenuously in 1885, “it is for the behoof of mankind as well as its own . . .”<sup>14</sup>

. . . Theories of social morality are always the product of a dominant group which identifies itself with the community as a whole, and which possesses facilities denied to subordinate groups or individuals for imposing its view of life on the community. Theories of international

morality are, for the same reason and in virtue of the same process, the product of dominant nations or groups of nations. For the past hundred years, and more especially since 1918, the English-speaking peoples have formed the dominant group in the world; and current theories of international morality have been designed to perpetuate their supremacy and expressed in the idiom peculiar to them. France, retaining something of her eighteenth-century tradition and restored to a position of dominance for a short period after 1918, has played a minor part in the creation of current international morality, mainly through her insistence on the role of law in the moral order. Germany, never a dominant Power and reduced to helplessness after 1918, has remained for these reasons outside the charmed circle of creators of international morality. Both the view that the English-speaking peoples are monopolists of international morality and the view that they are consummate international hypocrites may be reduced to the plain fact that the current canons of international virtue have, by a natural and inevitable process, been mainly created by them.

### **The realist critique of the harmony of interests**

The doctrine of the harmony of interests yields readily to analysis in terms of this principle. It is the natural assumption of a prosperous and privileged class, whose members have a dominant voice in the community and are therefore naturally prone to identify its interest with their own. In virtue of this identification, any assailant of the interests of the dominant group is made to incur the odium of assailing the alleged common interest of the whole community, and is told that in making this assault he is attacking his own higher interests. The doctrine of the harmony of interests thus serves as an ingenious moral device invoked, in perfect sincerity, by privileged groups in order to justify and maintain their dominant position. But a further point requires notice. The supremacy within the community of the privileged group may be, and often is, so overwhelming that there is, in fact, a sense in which its interests are those of the community, since its well-being necessarily carries with it some measure of well-being for other members of the community, and its collapse would entail the collapse of the community as a whole. In so far, therefore, as the alleged natural harmony of interests has any reality, it is created by the overwhelming power of the privileged group, and is an excellent illustration of the Machiavellian maxim that morality is the product of power . . .

. . . British nineteenth-century statesmen, having discovered that free trade promoted British prosperity, were sincerely convinced that, in doing so, it also promoted the prosperity of the world as a whole. British predominance in world trade was at that time so overwhelming that there was a certain undeniable harmony between British interests and the interests of the world. British prosperity flowed over into other countries, and a British economic collapse would have meant world-wide ruin. British free traders could and did argue that protectionist countries were not only egotistically damaging the prosperity of the world as a whole, but were stupidly damaging their own, so that their behaviour was both immoral and muddle headed. In British eyes, it was irrefutably proved that international trade was a single whole, and flourished or slumped together. Nevertheless, this alleged international harmony of interests seemed a mockery to those under-privileged nations whose inferior status and insignificant stake in international trade were consecrated by it. The revolt against it destroyed that overwhelming British preponderance which had provided a plausible basis for the theory. Economically, Great Britain in the nineteenth century was dominant enough to make a bold bid to impose on the world her own conception of international economic morality. When competition of all against all replaced the domination of the world market by a single Power, conceptions of international economic morality necessarily became chaotic.

Politically, the alleged community of interest in the maintenance of peace, whose ambiguous character has already been discussed, is capitalised in the same way by a dominant nation or group of nations. Just as the ruling class in a community prays for domestic peace, which guarantees its own security and predominance, and denounces class-war, which might threaten them, so international peace becomes a special vested interest of predominant Powers. In the past, Roman and British imperialism were commended to the world in the guise of the *pax Romana* and the *pax Britannica*. Today, when no single Power is strong enough to dominate the world, and supremacy is vested in a group of nations, slogans like “collective security” and “resistance to aggression” serve the same purpose of proclaiming an identity of interest between the dominant group and the world as a whole in the maintenance of peace. Moreover, as in the examples we have just considered, so long as the supremacy of the dominant group is sufficiently great, there is a sense in which this identity of interests exists. “England”, wrote a German professor in the nineteen-twenties, “is the solitary Power with a national programme which, while egotistic through and through, at the same time promises to the world something which the world passionately desires: order, progress and eternal peace.”<sup>15</sup> When Mr. Churchill declared that “the fortunes of the British Empire and its glory are inseparably interwoven with the fortunes of the world”,<sup>16</sup> this statement had precisely the same foundation in fact as the statement that the prosperity of British manufacturers in the nineteenth century was inseparably interwoven with British prosperity as a whole. Moreover, the purpose of the statements was precisely the same, namely to establish the principle that the defence of the British Empire, or the prosperity of the British manufacturer, was a matter of common interest to the whole community, and that anyone who attacked it was therefore either immoral or muddle-headed. It is a familiar tactic of the privileged to throw moral discredit on the under-privileged by depicting them as disturbers of the peace; and this tactic is as readily applied internationally as within the national community. “International law and order”, writes Professor Toynbee of a recent crisis, “were in the true interests of the whole of mankind . . . whereas the desire to perpetuate the region of violence in international affairs was an anti-social desire which was not even in the ultimate interests of the citizens of the handful of states that officially professed this benighted and anachronistic creed.”<sup>17</sup> This is precisely the argument, compounded of platitude and falsehood in about equal parts, which did duty in every strike in the early days of the British and American Labour movements. It was common form for employers, supported by the whole capitalist press, to denounce the “anti-social” attitude of trade union leaders, to accuse them of attacking law and order and of introducing “the reign of violence”, and to declare that “true” and “ultimate” interests of the workers lay in peaceful co-operation with the employers.<sup>18</sup> In the field of social relations, the disingenuous character of this argument has long been recognised. But just as the threat of class-war by the proletariat is “a natural cynical reaction to the sentimental and dishonest efforts of the privileged classes to obscure the conflict of interest between classes by a constant emphasis on the minimum interests which they have in common”,<sup>19</sup> so the war-mongering of the dissatisfied Powers was the “natural, cynical reaction” to the sentimental and dishonest platitudinising of the satisfied Powers on the common interest in peace. When Hitler refused to believe “that God has permitted some nations first to acquire a world by force and then to defend this robbery with moralising theories”,<sup>20</sup> he was merely echoing in another context the Marxist denial of a community of interest between “haves” and “have-nots”, the Marxist exposure of the interested character of “bourgeois morality”, and the Marxist demand for the expropriation of the expropriators.

The crisis of September 1938 demonstrated in a striking way the political implications of



the assertion of a common interest in peace. When Briand proclaimed that "peace comes before all", or Mr. Eden that "there is no dispute which cannot be settled by peaceful means",<sup>21</sup> the assumption underlying these platitudes was that, so long as peace was maintained, no changes distasteful to France or Great Britain could be made in the *status quo*. In 1938, France and Great Britain were trapped by the slogans which they themselves had used in the past to discredit the dissatisfied Powers, and Germany had become sufficiently dominant (as France and Great Britain had hitherto been) to turn the desire for peace to her own advantage. About this time, a significant change occurred in the attitude of the German and Italian dictators. Hitler eagerly depicted Germany as a bulwark of peace menaced by war-mongering democracies. The League of Nations, he declared in his Reichstag speech of April 28, 1939, is a "stirrer up of trouble", and collective security means "continuous danger of war". Mussolini borrowed the British formula about the possibility of settling all international disputes by peaceful means, and declared that "there are not in Europe at present problems so big and so active as to justify a war which from a European conflict would naturally become universal".<sup>22</sup> Such utterances were symptoms that Germany and Italy were already looking forward to the time when, as dominant Powers, they would acquire the vested interest in peace recently enjoyed by Great Britain and France, and be able to get their way by pillorying the democratic countries as enemies of peace. These developments may have made it easier to appreciate Halévy's subtle observation that "propaganda against war is itself a form of war propaganda".<sup>23</sup>

### **The realist critique of internationalism**

The concept of internationalism is a special form of the doctrine of the harmony of interests. It yields to the same analysis; and there are the same difficulties about regarding it as an absolute standard independent of the interests and policies of those who promulgate it . . .

Just as pleas for "national solidarity" in domestic politics always come from a dominant group which can use this solidarity to strengthen its own control over the nation as a whole, so pleas for international solidarity and world union come from those dominant nations which may hope to exercise control over a unified world. Countries which are struggling to force their way into the dominant group naturally tend to invoke nationalism against the internationalism of the controlling Powers. In the sixteenth century, England opposed her nascent nationalism to the internationalism of the Papacy and the Empire. In the past century and a half Germany opposed her nascent nationalism to the internationalism first of France, then of Great Britain. This circumstance made her impervious to those universalist and humanitarian doctrines which were popular in eighteenth-century France and nineteenth-century Britain; and her hostility to internationalism was further aggravated after 1919, when Great Britain and France endeavoured to create a new "international order" as a bulwark of their own predominance. "By 'international'," wrote a German correspondent in *The Times*, "we have come to understand a conception that places other nations at an advantage over our own."<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, there was little doubt that Germany, if she became supreme in Europe, would adopt international slogans and establish some kind of international organization to bolster up her power. A British Labour ex-Minister at one moment advocated the suppression of Article 16 of the Covenant of the League of Nations on the unexpected ground that the totalitarian states might some day capture the League and invoke that article to justify the use of force by themselves.<sup>25</sup> It seemed more likely that they would seek to develop the Anti-Comintern Pact into some form of international organization. "The Anti-Comintern Pact", said Hitler in the Reichstag on January 30, 1939,



“will perhaps one day become the crystallisation point of a group of Powers whose ultimate aim is none other than to eliminate the menace to the peace and culture of the world instigated by a satanic apparition.” “Either Europe must achieve solidarity,” remarked an Italian journal about the same time, “or the ‘axis’ will impose it.”<sup>26</sup> “Europe in its entirety”, said Goebbels, “is adopting a new order and a new orientation under the intellectual leadership of National Socialist Germany and Fascist Italy.”<sup>27</sup> These were symptoms not of a change of heart, but of the fact that Germany and Italy felt themselves to be approaching the time when they might become strong enough to espouse internationalism. “International order” and “international solidarity” will always be slogans of those who feel strong enough to impose them on others.

The exposure of the real basis of the professedly abstract principles commonly invoked in international politics is the most damning and most convincing part of the realist indictment of utopianism. The nature of the charge is frequently misunderstood by those who seek to refute it. The charge is not that human beings fail to live up to their principles. It matters little that Wilson, who thought that the right was more precious than peace, and Briand, who thought that peace came even before justice, and Mr. Eden, who believed in collective security, failed themselves, or failed to induce their countrymen, to apply these principles consistently. What matters is that these supposedly absolute and universal principles were not principles at all, but the unconscious reflexions of national policy based on a particular interpretation of national interest at a particular time. There is a sense in which peace and co-operation between nations or classes or individuals is a common and universal end irrespective of conflicting interests and politics. There is a sense in which a common interest exists in the maintenance of order, whether it be international order or “law and order” within the nation. But as soon as the attempt is made to apply these supposedly abstract principles to a concrete political situation, they are revealed as the transparent disguises of selfish vested interests. The bankruptcy of utopianism resides not in its failure to live up to its principles, but in the exposure of its inability to provide any absolute and disinterested standard for the conduct of international affairs. The utopian, faced by the collapse of standards whose interested character he has failed to penetrate, takes refuge in condemnation of a reality which refuses to conform to these standards . . .

## Notes

- 1 Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chs. 15 and 23 (Engl. Transl., Everyman’s Library, pp. 121, 193).
- 2 The concluding words of Buckle’s *History of Civilisation*.
- 3 Kjellen, *Der Staat als Lebensform*, p. 81. Compare the opening words of Crowe’s famous memorandum on British foreign policy: “The general character of England’s foreign policy is determined by the immutable conditions of her geographical situation” (*British Documents on the Origin of the War*, ed. Gooch and Temperley, iii. p. 397).
- 4 *International Conciliation*, No. 194. January 1924, p. 3.
- 5 Marx, *Capital*, Preface to 1st ed. (Engl. transl., Everyman’s Library, p. 863).
- 6 Lenin, *Works* (2nd Russian ed.), x. p. 207.
- 7 *Ibid.* xxii, p. 194.
- 8 Croce, *Storia della storiografia italiana*, i. p. 26.
- 9 Hegel, *Philosophie der Weltgeschichte* (Lasson’s ed.), p. 55.
- 10 *Conciliation Internationale*, No. 5–6, 1937, p. 520.
- 11 Lukacs, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein*, p. 215.
- 12 *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1915–16, p. 302.
- 13 Dicey, *Law and Opinion in England* (2nd ed.), pp. 14–15.
- 14 *The Times*, August 27, 1885.
- 15 Dibelius, *England*, p. 109.

- 16 Winston Churchill, *Arms and the Covenant*, p. 272.
- 17 Toynbee, *Survey of International Affairs*, 1935, ii. p. 46.
- 18 “Pray earnestly that right may triumph”, said the representative of the Philadelphia coal-owners in an early strike organised by the United Mine Workers, “remembering that the Lord God Omnipotent still reigns, and that His reign is one of law and order, and not of violence and crime” (H. F. Pringle, *Theodore Roosevelt*, p. 267).
- 19 R. Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p. 153.
- 20 Speech in the Reichstag, January 30, 1939.
- 21 *League of Nations: Eighteenth Assembly*, p. 63.
- 22 *The Times*, May 15, 1939.
- 23 Halévy, *A History of the English People in 1895–1905* (Engl. transl.), i. Introduction, p. xi.
- 24 *The Times*, November 5, 1938.
- 25 Lord Marley in the House of Lords, November 30, 1938: *Official Report*, col. 258.
- 26 *Relazioni Internazionali*, quoted in *The Times*, December 5, 1938.
- 27 *Völkischer Beobachter*, April 1, 1939.

# The moral blindness of scientific man

*Hans J. Morgenthau*

From: *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1946), Chapter 7.

## **. . . Selfishness and lust for power**

Whatever man does or intends to do emanates from himself and refers again to himself. The person of the actor is present in all intended and consummated action. All action, on the other hand, bears positively and negatively upon others. It does so in a positive sense when the point of reference of the action intended or performed is another person, and most actions are naturally of this kind. But even when the action as such contains no positive reference to another person, this very lack of reference connects the action with other persons. For since the moral demands for action which society addresses to the individual are never completely satisfied, an action which has no reference to another person appears, at least from the point of view of the latter, as a deprivation, the violation of a moral duty, and thus carries negative moral significance.

If the connectedness of the self with others through his action is inevitable, the moral conflict between the self and others is no less inevitable. The individual is under the moral obligation to be unselfish, that is, not to sacrifice the interests of others to his own. However, the demands which poverty alone puts to our unselfishness are so overwhelming that any attempt at even faintly approximating unselfishness would of necessity lead to the sacrifice of the individual and would thus destroy his ability to contribute at least a certain share of unselfishness to the overwhelming demands of the world. The attempt to do justice to the ethics of unselfishness thus leads to the paradox of the ethical obligation to be selfish in order to be able to satisfy the moral obligation of unselfishness at least to a certain extent. Hence unselfish (i.e., good) action intended or performed can never be completely good (i.e., completely unselfish); for it can never completely transcend the limitations of selfishness to which it owes its existence. "Concupiscence," said Martin Luther, "is insuperable." Even the action which approximates complete goodness, by either achieving, or just stopping short of, self-sacrifice, partakes paradoxically of evil.

Once the very logic of the ethics of unselfishness has thus put its stamp of approval on selfishness, individual egotisms, all equally legitimate, confront each other; and the war of every man against every man is on. There are two reasons why the egotism of one must come into conflict with the egotism of the other. What the one wants for himself, the other already possesses or wants, too. Struggle and competition ensue. Finding that all his relations with his fellow-men contain at least the germs of such conflicts of interest, man can no longer seek the goodness of his intentions in the almost complete absence of selfishness and of the concomitant harm to others but only in the limitations which conscience puts upon the drive toward evil. Man cannot hope to be good but must be content with being not too evil.

The other root of conflict and concomitant evil stems from the *animus dominandi*, the desire for power. This lust for power manifests itself as the desire to maintain the range of one's own person with regard to others, to increase it, or to demonstrate it. In whatever disguises it may appear, its ultimate essence and aim is in one of these particular references of one person to others. Centered as it is upon the person of the actor in relation to others, the desire for power is closely related to the selfishness of which we have spoken but is not identical with it. For the typical goals of selfishness, such as food, shelter, security, and the means by which they are obtained, such as money, jobs, marriage, and the like, have an objective relation to the vital needs of the individual; their attainment offers the best chances for survival under the particular natural and social conditions under which the individual lives.

The desire for power, on the other hand, concerns itself not with the individual's survival but with his position among his fellows once his survival has been secured. Consequently, the selfishness of man has limits; his will to power has none. For while man's vital needs are capable of satisfaction, his lust for power would be satisfied only if the last man became an object of his domination, there being nobody above or beside him, that is, if he became like God. "The fact is," as Aristotle put it, "that the greatest crimes are caused by excess and not by necessity. Men do not become tyrants in order that they may not suffer cold" . . . There is in selfishness an element of rationality presented by the natural limitation of the end, which is lacking in the will to power. It is for this reason that mere selfishness can be appeased by concessions while satisfaction of one demand will stimulate the will to power to ever expanding claims . . .

By setting in this way the desire for power apart from selfishness, on the one hand, and from the other transcendent urges, on the other, one is already doing violence to the actual nature of that desire; for actually it is present whenever man intends to act with regard to other men. One may separate it conceptually from the other ingredients of social action; actually there is no social action which would not contain at least a trace of this desire to make one's own person prevail against others. It is this ubiquity of the desire for power which, besides and beyond any particular selfishness or other evilness of purpose, constitutes the ubiquity of evil in human action. Here is the element of corruption and of sin which injects even into the best of intentions at least a drop of evil and thus spoils it. On a grand scale, the transformation of churches into political organizations, of revolutions into dictatorships, of love for country into imperialism, are cases in point.

To the degree in which the essence and aim of politics is power over man, politics is evil; for it is to this degree that it degrades man to a means for other men. It follows that the prototype of this corruption through power is to be found on the political scene. For here the *animus dominandi* is not merely blended with dominant aims of a different kind but is the very essence of the intention, the very life-blood of the action, the constitutive principle of politics as a distinct sphere of human activity. Politics is a struggle for power over men, and whatever its ultimate aim may be, power is its immediate goal and the modes of acquiring, maintaining, and demonstrating it determine the technique of political action.

The evil that corrupts political action is the same evil that corrupts all action, but the corruption of political action is indeed the paradigm and the prototype of all possible corruption. The distinction between private and political action is not one between innocence and guilt, morality and immorality, goodness and evil, but lies in the degree alone in which the two types of action deviate from the ethical norm. Nor is the distinction of a normative character at all. To hold differently, as the school of the dual standard does, is to confound the moral obligations of man and his actual behavior with respect to these obligations. From

the fact that the political acts of a person differ from his private ones, it does not follow that he recognizes different moral precepts in the different spheres of action. There is not one kind of ethical precept applying to political action and another one to the private sphere, but one and the same ethical standard applies to both—observed and observable, however, by either with unequal compliance.

That political action and doing evil are inevitably linked becomes fully clear only when we recognize not only that ethical standards are empirically violated on the political scene, and this to a particular degree, but that it is unattainable for an action at the same time to conform to the rules of the political art (i.e., to achieve political success) and to conform to the rules of ethics (i.e., to be good in itself). The test of political success is the degree to which one is able to maintain, to increase, or to demonstrate one's power over others. The test of a morally good action is the degree to which it is capable of treating others not as means to the actor's ends but as ends in themselves. It is for this reason alone inevitable that, whereas nonpolitical action is ever exposed to corruption by selfishness and lust for power, this corruption is inherent in the very nature of the political act . . .

### **The particular corruption of political man**

The scope of this corruption, which, as such, is a permanent element of human existence and therefore operates regardless of historic circumstances everywhere and at all times, is broadened and its intensity strengthened by the particular conditions under which political action proceeds in the modern nation state. The state has become in the secular sphere the most exalted object of loyalty on the part of the individual and at the same time the most effective organization for the exercise of power over the individual. These two qualities enable the modern state to accentuate the corruption of the political sphere both qualitatively and quantitatively. This is accomplished by two complementary processes.

The state as the receptacle of the highest secular loyalty and power devaluates and actually delimits the manifestations of the individual desire for power. The individual, power-hungry for his own sake, is held in low public esteem; and the mores and laws of society endeavor to strengthen through positive sanctions the moral condemnation of individual aspirations for power, to limit their modes and sphere of action, and to suppress them altogether. While, however, the state is ideologically and physically incomparably more powerful than its citizens, it is free from all effective restraint from above. The state's collective desire for power is limited, aside from self-chosen limitations, only by the ruins of an old, and the rudiments of a new, normative order, both too feeble to offer more than a mere intimation of actual restraint. Above it, there is no centralized authority beyond the mechanics of the balance of power, which could impose actual limits upon the manifestations of its collective desire for domination. The state has become indeed a "mortal God," and for an age that believes no longer in an immortal God, the state becomes the only God there is.

Moreover, what the individual is not allowed to want for himself, he is encouraged to seek for the legal fiction called "the state." The impulses which both ethics and the state do not allow the individual to satisfy for his own sake are directed by the state itself toward its own ends. By transferring his egotism and power impulses to the nation, the individual gives his inhibited aspirations not only a vicarious satisfaction. The process of transference transforms also the ethical significance of the satisfaction. What was egotism—and hence ignoble and immoral—there becomes patriotism and therefore noble and altruistic here. While society puts liabilities upon aspirations for individual power, it places contributions to the collective power of the state at the top of the hierarchy of values.

All these factors work together to stimulate the individual's lust for power and to give its manifestations a free reign, as long as the individual seeks power not for himself directly but for the state. What occurs is thus, in the last analysis, not a suppression of power drives but a quantitative and qualitative extension coupled with a shift in direction. That the extension is quantitative is obvious; for, put at the service of the state, the individual's *animus dominandi* has not only in imagination but in actuality the world as its object. That the extension is also qualitative is less obvious; yet it is the true appreciation of this qualitative element which opens our eyes to the subtlety and at the same time to the immensity of the corruption wrought by the transference of the power impulses from the individual to the state. This corruption spreads in two different dimensions.

While encouraging the diversion of the power drives from the individual to the state, the latter obscures the quantitative corruption which ensues from this diversion. Political ideologies blunt the individual conscience, which tends to become oblivious to the corruption of power in the public sphere while still being conscious of its private manifestations. The dual morality mentioned above, which justifies what is done for the power of the state but condemns it when it is done for the power of the individual, presents but the positive aspect and at the same time the logical consummation of this forgetfulness. In the end, the individual comes to believe that there is less evil in the aspirations for state power than there is in the lust for individual dominance, nay, that to the former attaches a peculiar virtue which is lacking in the latter.

However, not all will experience such a complete reversal of ethical valuation, and even those who do will not do so without retaining at least some vestiges of moral scruples. Their consciences will still be uneasy in the presence of power impulses, and their moral misgivings will seek alleviation. Here is the scene of the ultimate moral corruption through power, for here it is not action that is corrupted or moral judgment which regards as good what it ought to consider evil. What here takes place is a formidable perversion of the moral sense itself, an acquiescence in evil in the name of the very standards which ought to condemn it.

An outstanding example of this blind and naïve perversity of moral sense is the condemnation of power politics by most spokesmen of our civilization. There is indeed a point of view from which such condemnation could be intellectually and morally justified, that is, the Augustinian recognition of both the inevitability and the evilness of the lust for power. Such is, however, not the position taken. The radical evil is, in the words of Kant, "a principle which falls completely outside the rational world view." A civilization which has made this world view its own has deprived itself of the intellectual faculty to master the radical evil of the lust for power. Where the essence of this evil can no longer be denied, it can at least be belittled and its necessary and intimate connection with human life in society can be denied. Thus, the spokesmen of our civilization do not recognize the ubiquity of the lust for power and of its evilness but assume that the power element and its evilness are particularly attached to certain actions, situations, and institutions and that, by reforming or abolishing them, the lust for power itself could be abolished and the moral problem of power would thus be solved. They fight a sham battle which they can never win, and it would not matter if they could. For in a world where power counts, no nation pursuing a rational policy has a choice between renouncing and wanting power; and, if it could, the lust for power for the individual's sake would still confront us with its less spectacular yet no less pressing moral defects. This sham battle against power politics, however, gives our civilization at least the satisfaction of having paid tribute to its ethical standards and of being able to continue to live as though those standards did not exist.

It is easy to see why the greatest corruption through power coincides with the greatest shallowness of the attempts to explain this corruption away. Where the lust for power seizes upon the state as the vehicle on which to ride to hegemonial power among the nations, absolute corruption follows in the wake of this drive for absolute power. For here the use of all mankind as a means is not wished for in hapless imagination but worked for in actual performance. Only the greatest moral courage and intellectual penetration could comprehend the full measure of this corruption and still not destroy the faculty to live and act. Here the gulf between ethics and politics has become too wide and too inscrutable for the attempts by the perfectionists, the escapists, and the men of the dual standard at bridging it over and filling it in. In the face of the evil of power approaching its consummation, it becomes necessary at least to recognize the existence of a problem presented by some kind of contradiction between political power and ethics. Yet, where the occasion calls for the comprehension of one of the great tragic antinomies of human existence, the age has nothing better to offer than a narrow and distorted formulation of the problem and a sentimental and irrelevant solution in the spirit of political reform.

### **The lesser evil**

... There is no escape from the evil of power, regardless of what one does. Whenever we act with reference to our fellow men, we must sin, and we must still sin when we refuse to act; for the refusal to be involved in the evil of action carries with it the breach of the obligation to do one's duty. No ivory tower is remote enough to offer protection against the guilt in which the actor and the bystander, the oppressor and the oppressed, the murderer and his victim are inextricably enmeshed. Political ethics is indeed the ethics of doing evil. While it condemns politics as the domain of evil par excellence, it must reconcile itself to the enduring presence of evil in all political action. Its last resort, then, is the endeavor to choose, since evil there must be, among several possible actions the one that is least evil.

It is indeed trivial, in the face of so tragic a choice, to invoke justice against expediency and to condemn whatever political action is chosen because of its lack of justice. Such an attitude is but another example of the superficiality of a civilization which, blind to the tragic complexities of human existence, contents itself with an unreal and hypocritical solution of the problem of political ethics. In fact, the invocation of justice pure and simple against a political action makes of justice a mockery; for, since all political actions needs must fall short of justice, the argument against one political action holds true for all. By avoiding a political action because it is unjust, the perfectionist does nothing but exchange blindly one injustice for another which might even be worse than the former. He shrinks from the lesser evil because he does not want to do evil at all. Yet his personal abstention from evil, which is actually a subtle form of egotism with a good conscience, does not at all affect the existence of evil in the world but only destroys the faculty of discriminating between different evils. The perfectionist thus becomes finally a source of greater evil. "Man," in the words of Pascal, "is neither angel nor beast and his misery is that he who would act the angel acts the brute." Here again it is only the awareness of the tragic presence of evil in all political action which at least enables man to choose the lesser evil and to be as good as he can be in an evil world.

Neither science nor ethics nor politics can resolve the conflict between politics and ethics into harmony. We have no choice between power and the common good. To act successfully, that is, according to the rules of the political art, is political wisdom. To know with despair



that the political act is inevitably evil, and to act nevertheless, is moral courage. To choose among several expedient actions the least evil one is moral judgment. In the combination of political wisdom, moral courage, and moral judgment, man reconciles his political nature with his moral destiny. That this conciliation is nothing more than a *modus vivendi*, uneasy, precarious, and even paradoxical, can disappoint only those who prefer to gloss over and to distort the tragic contradictions of human existence with the soothing logic of a specious concord.

# A realist theory of international politics

*Hans J. Morgenthau*

From: *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 1985), Chapter 1.

. . . The history of modern political thought is the story of a contest between two schools that differ fundamentally in their conceptions of the nature of man, society, and politics. One believes that a rational and moral political order, derived from universally valid abstract principles, can be achieved here and now. It assumes the essential goodness and infinite malleability of human nature, and blames the failure of the social order to measure up to the rational standards on lack of knowledge and understanding, obsolescent social institutions, or the depravity of certain isolated individuals or groups. It trusts in education, reform, and the sporadic use of force to remedy these defects.

The other school believes that the world, imperfect as it is from the rational point of view, is the result of forces inherent in human nature. To improve the world one must work with those forces, not against them. This being inherently a world of opposing interests and of conflict among them, moral principles can never be fully realized, but must at best be approximated through the ever temporary balancing of interests and the ever precarious settlement of conflicts. This school, then, sees in a system of checks and balances a universal principle for all pluralist societies. It appeals to historic precedent rather than to abstract principles, and aims at the realization of the lesser evil rather than of the absolute good.

This theoretical concern with human nature as it actually is, and with the historic processes as they actually take place, has earned for the theory presented here the name of realism. What are the tenets of political realism? No systematic exposition of the philosophy of political realism can be attempted here; it will suffice to single out six fundamental principles, which have frequently been misunderstood.

## **Six principles of political realism**

1. Political realism believes that politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature. In order to improve society it is first necessary to understand the laws by which society lives. The operation of these laws being impervious to our preferences, men will challenge them only at the risk of failure.

Realism, believing as it does in the objectivity of the laws of politics, must also believe in the possibility of developing a rational theory that reflects, however imperfectly and one-sidedly, these objective laws. It believes also, then, in the possibility of distinguishing in politics between truth and opinion—between what is true objectively and rationally, supported by evidence and illuminated by reason, and what is only a subjective judgment, divorced from the facts as they are and informed by prejudice and wishful thinking.

Human nature, in which the laws of politics have their roots, has not changed since the classical philosophies of China, India, and Greece endeavored to discover these laws. Hence,

novelty is not necessarily a virtue in political theory, nor is old age a defect. The fact that a theory of politics, if there be such a theory, has never been heard of before tends to create a presumption against, rather than in favor of, its soundness. Conversely, the fact that a theory of politics was developed hundreds or even thousands of years ago—as was the theory of the balance of power—does not create a presumption that it must be outmoded and obsolete. A theory of politics must be subjected to the dual test of reason and experience. To dismiss such a theory because it had its flowering in centuries past is to present not a rational argument but a modernistic prejudice that takes for granted the superiority of the present over the past. To dispose of the revival of such a theory as a “fashion” or “fad” is tantamount to assuming that in matters political we can have opinions but no truths.

For realism, theory consists in ascertaining facts and giving them meaning through reason. It assumes that the character of a foreign policy can be ascertained only through the examination of the political acts performed and of the foreseeable consequences of these acts. Thus we can find out what statesmen have actually done, and from the foreseeable consequences of their acts we can surmise what their objectives might have been.

Yet examination of the facts is not enough. To give meaning to the factual raw material of foreign policy, we must approach political reality with a kind of rational outline, a map that suggests to us the possible meanings of foreign policy. In other words, we put ourselves in the position of a statesman who must meet a certain problem of foreign policy under certain circumstances, and we ask ourselves what the rational alternatives are from which a statesman may choose who must meet this problem under these circumstances (presuming always that he acts in a rational manner), and which of these rational alternatives this particular statesman, acting under these circumstances, is likely to choose. It is the testing of this rational hypothesis against the actual facts and their consequences that gives theoretical meaning to the facts of international politics.

2. The main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics is the concept of interest defined in terms of power. This concept provides the link between reason trying to understand international politics and the facts to be understood. It sets politics as an autonomous sphere of action and understanding apart from other spheres, such as economics (understood in terms of interest defined as wealth), ethics, aesthetics, or religion. Without such a concept a theory of politics, international or domestic, would be altogether impossible, for without it we could not distinguish between political and nonpolitical facts, nor could we bring at least a measure of systemic order to the political sphere.

We assume that statesmen think and act in terms of interest defined as power, and the evidence of history bears that assumption out. That assumption allows us to retrace and anticipate, as it were, the steps a statesman—past, present, or future—has taken or will take on the political scene. We look over his shoulder when he writes his dispatches; we listen in on his conversation with other statesmen; we read and anticipate his very thoughts. Thinking in terms of interest defined as power, we think as he does, and as disinterested observers we understand his thoughts and actions perhaps better than he, the actor on the political scene, does himself.

The concept of interest defined as power imposes intellectual discipline upon the observer, infuses rational order into the subject matter of politics, and thus makes the theoretical understanding of politics possible. On the side of the actor, it provides for rational discipline in action and creates that astounding continuity in foreign policy which makes American, British, or Russian foreign policy appear as an intelligible, rational continuum, by and large consistent within itself, regardless of the different motives, preferences, and intellectual and

moral qualities of successive statesmen. A realist theory of international politics, then, will guard against two popular fallacies: the concern with motives and the concern with ideological preferences.

To search for the clue to foreign policy exclusively in the motives of statesmen is both futile and deceptive. It is futile because motives are the most illusive of psychological data, distorted as they are, frequently beyond recognition, by the interests and emotions of actor and observer alike. Do we really know what our own motives are? And what do we know of the motives of others?

Yet even if we had access to the real motives of statesmen, that knowledge would help us little in understanding foreign policies, and might well lead us astray. It is true that the knowledge of the statesman's motives may give us one among many clues as to what the direction of his foreign policy might be. It cannot give us, however, the one clue by which to predict his foreign policies. History shows no exact and necessary correlation between the quality of motives and the quality of foreign policy. This is true in both moral and political terms.

We cannot conclude from the good intentions of a statesman that his foreign policies will be either morally praiseworthy or politically successful. Judging his motives, we can say that he will not intentionally pursue policies that are morally wrong, but we can say nothing about the probability of their success. If we want to know the moral and political qualities of his actions, we must know them, not his motives. How often have statesmen been motivated by the desire to improve the world, and ended by making it worse? And how often have they sought one goal, and ended by achieving something they neither expected nor desired?

Neville Chamberlain's politics of appeasement were, as far as we can judge, inspired by good motives; he was probably less motivated by considerations of personal power than were many other British prime ministers, and he sought to preserve peace and to assure the happiness of all concerned. Yet his policies helped to make the Second World War inevitable, and to bring untold miseries to millions of people. Sir Winston Churchill's motives, on the other hand, were much less universal in scope and much more narrowly directed toward personal and national power, yet the foreign policies that sprang from these inferior motives were certainly superior in moral and political quality to those pursued by his predecessor. Judged by his motives, Robespierre was one of the most virtuous men who ever lived. Yet it was the utopian radicalism of that very virtue that made him kill those less virtuous than himself, brought him to the scaffold, and destroyed the revolution of which he was a leader.

Good motives give assurance against deliberately bad policies; they do not guarantee the moral goodness and political success of the policies they inspire. What is important to know, if one wants to understand foreign policy, is not primarily the motives of a statesman, but his intellectual ability to comprehend the essentials of foreign policy, as well as his political ability to translate what he has comprehended into successful political action. It follows that while ethics in the abstract judges the moral qualities of motives, political theory must judge the political qualities of intellect, will, and action.

A realist theory of international politics will also avoid the other popular fallacy of equating the foreign policies of a statesman with his philosophic or political sympathies, and of deducing the former from the latter. Statesmen, especially under contemporary conditions, may well make a habit of presenting their foreign policies in terms of their philosophic and political sympathies in order to gain popular support for them. Yet they will distinguish with Lincoln between their "*official duty*," which is to think and act in terms of the national interest, and their "*personal wish*," which is to see their own moral

values and political principles realized throughout the world. Political realism does not require, nor does it condone, indifference to political ideals and moral principles, but it requires indeed a sharp distinction between the desirable and the possible—between what is desirable everywhere and at all times and what is possible under the concrete circumstances of time and place.

It stands to reason that not all foreign policies have always followed so rational, objective, and unemotional a course. The contingent elements of personality, prejudice, and subjective preference, and of all the weaknesses of intellect and will which flesh is heir to, are bound to deflect foreign policies from their rational course. Especially where foreign policy is conducted under the conditions of democratic control, the need to marshal popular emotions to the support of foreign policy cannot fail to impair the rationality of foreign policy itself. Yet a theory of foreign policy which aims at rationality must for the time being, as it were, abstract from these irrational elements and seek to paint a picture of foreign policy which presents the rational essence to be found in experience, without the contingent deviations from rationality which are also found in experience . . .

The difference between international politics as it actually is and a rational theory derived from it is like the difference between a photograph and a painted portrait. The photograph shows everything that can be seen by the naked eye; the painted portrait does not show everything that can be seen by the naked eye, but it shows, or at least seeks to show, one thing that the naked eye cannot see: the human essence of the person portrayed.

Political realism contains not only a theoretical but also a normative element. It knows that political reality is replete with contingencies and systemic irrationalities and points to the typical influences they exert upon foreign policy. Yet it shares with all social theory the need, for the sake of theoretical understanding, to stress the rational elements of political reality; for it is these rational elements that make reality intelligible for theory. Political realism presents the theoretical construct of a rational foreign policy which experience can never completely achieve.

At the same time political realism considers a rational foreign policy to be good foreign policy; for only a rational foreign policy minimizes risks and maximizes benefits and, hence, complies both with the moral precept of prudence and the political requirement of success. Political realism wants the photographic picture of the political world to resemble as much as possible its painted portrait. Aware of the inevitable gap between good—that is, rational—foreign policy and foreign policy as it actually is, political realism maintains not only that theory must focus upon the rational elements of political reality, but also that foreign policy ought to be rational in view of its own moral and practical purposes.

Hence, it is no argument against the theory here presented that actual foreign policy does not or cannot live up to it. That argument misunderstands the intention of this book, which is to present not an indiscriminate description of political reality, but a rational theory of international politics. Far from being invalidated by the fact that, for instance, a perfect balance of power policy will scarcely be found in reality, it assumes that reality, being deficient in this respect, must be understood and evaluated as an approximation to an ideal system of balance of power.

3. Realism assumes that its key concept of interest defined as power is an objective category which is universally valid, but it does not endow that concept with a meaning that is fixed once and for all. The idea of interest is indeed of the essence of politics and is unaffected by the circumstances of time and place. Thucydides' statement, born of the experiences of ancient Greece, that "identity of interests is the surest of bonds whether between states or individuals" was taken up in the nineteenth century by Lord Salisbury's

remark that “the only bond of union that endures” among nations is “the absence of all clashing interests” . . .

Yet the kind of interest determining political action in a particular period of history depends upon the political and cultural context within which foreign policy is formulated. The goals that might be pursued by nations in their foreign policy can run the whole gamut of objectives any nation has ever pursued or might possibly pursue.

The same observations apply to the concept of power. Its content and the manner of its use are determined by the political and cultural environment. Power may comprise anything that establishes and maintains the control of man over man. Thus power covers all social relationships which serve that end, from physical violence to the most subtle psychological ties by which one mind controls another. Power covers the domination of man by man, both when it is disciplined by moral ends and controlled by constitutional safeguards, as in Western democracies, and when it is that untamed and barbaric force which finds its laws in nothing but its own strength and its sole justification in its aggrandizement.

Political realism does not assume that the contemporary conditions under which foreign policy operates, with their extreme instability and the ever present threat of large-scale violence, cannot be changed. The balance of power, for instance, is indeed a perennial element of all pluralistic societies, as the authors of *The Federalist* papers well knew; yet it is capable of operating, as it does in the United States, under the conditions of relative stability and peaceful conflict. If the factors that have given rise to these conditions can be duplicated on the international scene, similar conditions of stability and peace will then prevail there, as they have over long stretches of history among certain nations.

What is true of the general character of international relations is also true of the nation state as the ultimate point of reference of contemporary foreign policy. While the realist indeed believes that interest is the perennial standard by which political action must be judged and directed, the contemporary connection between interest and the nation state is a product of history, and is therefore bound to disappear in the course of history. Nothing in the realist position militates against the assumption that the present division of the political world into nation states will be replaced by larger units of a quite different character, more in keeping with the technical potentialities and the moral requirements of the contemporary world.

The realist parts company with other schools of thought before the all-important question of how the contemporary world is to be transformed. The realist is persuaded that this transformation can be achieved only through the workmanlike manipulation of the perennial forces that have shaped the past as they will the future. The realist cannot be persuaded that we can bring about that transformation by confronting a political reality that has its own laws with an abstract ideal that refuses to take those laws into account.

4. Political realism is aware of the moral significance of political action. It is also aware of the ineluctable tension between the moral command and the requirements of successful political action. And it is unwilling to gloss over and obliterate that tension and thus to obfuscate both the moral and the political issue by making it appear as though the stark facts of politics were morally more satisfying than they actually are, and the moral law less exacting than it actually is.

Realism maintains that universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states in their abstract universal formulation, but that they must be filtered through the concrete circumstances of time and place. The individual may say for himself: “*Fiat justitia, pereat mundus* (Let justice be done, even if the world perish),” but the state has no right to say so in the name of those who are in its care. Both individual and state must judge

political action by universal moral principles, such as that of liberty. Yet while the individual has a moral right to sacrifice himself in defense of such a moral principle, the state has no right to let its moral disapprobation of the infringement of liberty get in the way of successful political action, itself inspired by the moral principle of national survival. There can be no political morality without prudence; that is, without consideration of the political consequences of seemingly moral action. Realism, then, considers prudence—the weighing of the consequences of alternative political actions—to be the supreme virtue in politics. Ethics in the abstract judges action by its conformity with the moral law; political ethics judges action by its political consequences . . .

5. Political realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe. As it distinguishes between truth and opinion, so it distinguishes between truth and idolatry. All nations are tempted—and few have been able to resist the temptation for long—to clothe their own particular aspirations and actions in the moral purposes of the universe. To know that nations are subject to the moral law is one thing, while to pretend to know with certainty what is good and evil in the relations among nations is quite another. There is a world of difference between the belief that all nations stand under the judgment of God, inscrutable to the human mind, and the blasphemous conviction that God is always on one's side and that what one wills oneself cannot fail to be willed by God also.

The lighthearted equation between a particular nationalism and the counsels of Providence is morally indefensible, for it is that very sin of pride against which the Greek tragedians and the Biblical prophets have warned rulers and ruled. That equation is also politically pernicious, for it is liable to engender the distortion in judgment which, in the blindness of crusading frenzy, destroys nations and civilizations—in the name of moral principle, ideal, or God himself.

On the other hand, it is exactly the concept of interest defined in terms of power that saves us from both that moral excess and that political folly. For if we look at all nations, our own included, as political entities pursuing their respective interests defined in terms of power, we are able to do justice to all of them. And we are able to do justice to all of them in a dual sense: We are able to judge other nations as we judge our own and, having judged them in this fashion, we are then capable of pursuing policies that respect the interests of other nations, while protecting and promoting those of our own. Moderation in policy cannot fail to reflect the moderation of moral judgment.

6. The difference, then, between political realism and other schools of thought is real, and it is profound. However much of the theory of political realism may have been misunderstood and misinterpreted, there is no gain-saying its distinctive intellectual and moral attitude to matters political.

Intellectually, the political realist maintains the autonomy of the political sphere, as the economist, the lawyer, the moralist maintain theirs. He thinks in terms of interest defined as power, as the economist thinks in terms of interest defined as wealth; the lawyer, of the conformity of action with legal rules; the moralist, of the conformity of action with moral principles. The economist asks: "How does this policy affect the wealth of society, or a segment of it?" The lawyer asks: "Is this policy in accord with the rules of law?" The moralist asks: "Is this policy in accord with moral principles?" And the political realist asks: "How does this policy affect the power of the nation?" (Or of the federal government, of Congress, of the party, of agriculture, as the case may be.)

The political realist is not unaware of the existence and relevance of standards of thought other than political ones. As political realist, he cannot but subordinate these other standards



to those of politics. And he parts company with other schools when they impose standards of thought appropriate to other spheres upon the political sphere. It is here that political realism takes issue with the “legalistic-moralistic approach” to international politics . . .

This realist defense of the autonomy of the political sphere against its subversion by other modes of thought does not imply disregard for the existence and importance of these other modes of thought. It rather implies that each should be assigned its proper sphere and function. Political realism is based upon a pluralistic conception of human nature. Real man is a composite of “economic man,” “political man,” “moral man,” “religious man,” etc. A man who was nothing but “political man” would be a beast, for he would be completely lacking in moral restraints. A man who was nothing but “moral man” would be a fool, for he would be completely lacking in prudence. A man who was nothing but “religious man” would be a saint, for he would be completely lacking in worldly desires.

Recognizing that these different facets of human nature exist, political realism also recognizes that in order to understand one of them one has to deal with it on its own terms. That is to say, if I want to understand “religious man,” I must for the time being abstract from the other aspects of human nature and deal with its religious aspect as if it were the only one. Furthermore, I must apply to the religious sphere the standards of thought appropriate to it, always remaining aware of the existence of other standards and their actual influence upon the religious qualities of man. What is true of this facet of human nature is true of all the others. No modern economist, for instance, would conceive of his science and its relations to other sciences of man in any other way. It is exactly through such a process of emancipation from other standards of thought, and the development of one appropriate to its subject matter, that economics has developed as an autonomous theory of the economic activities of man. To contribute to a similar development in the field of politics is indeed the purpose of political realism . . .

# Idealist internationalism and the security dilemma

*John H. Herz*

From: *World Politics* 2 (January 1950): 157–80.

The heartbreaking plight in which a bipolarized and atom bomb-blessed world finds itself today is but the extreme manifestation of a dilemma with which human societies have had to grapple since the dawn of history. For it stems from a fundamental social constellation, one where a plurality of otherwise interconnected groups constitute ultimate units of political life, that is, where groups live alongside each other without being organized into a higher unity.

Wherever such anarchic society has existed—and it has existed in most periods of known history on some level—there has arisen what may be called the “security dilemma” of men, or groups, or their leaders. Groups or individuals living in such a constellation must be, and usually are, concerned about their security from being attacked, subjected, dominated, or annihilated by other groups and individuals. Striving to attain security from such attack, they are driven to acquire more and more power in order to escape the impact of the power of others. This, in turn, renders the others more insecure and compels them to prepare for the worst. Since none can ever feel entirely secure in such a world of competing units, power competition ensues, and the vicious circle of security and power accumulation is on.

Whether man is by nature peaceful and cooperative, or domineering and aggressive, is not the question. The condition that concerns us here is not a biological or anthropological but a social one. This *homo homini lupus* situation does not preclude social cooperation as another fundamental fact of social life. But even cooperation and solidarity tend to become elements in the conflict situation, part of their function being the consolidation and the strengthening of particular groups in their competition with other groups. The struggle for security, then, is merely raised from the individual or lower-group level to a higher-group level. Thus, families and tribes may overcome the power game in their internal relations in order to face other families or tribes; larger groups may overcome it to face other classes unitedly; entire nations may compose their internal conflicts in order to face other nations. But ultimately, somewhere, conflicts caused by the security dilemma are bound to emerge among political units of power.

Such findings, one might agree with Henri Bergson, “ont de quoi attrister le moraliste,” and men have reacted to them in dissimilar ways. The two major ways of reacting will here be called Political Realism and Political Idealism. Political Realism frankly recognizes the phenomena which are connected with the urge for security and the competition for power, and takes their consequences into consideration. Political Idealism, on the other hand, usually starts from a more “rationalistic” assumption, namely, that a harmony exists, or may eventually be realized, between the individual concern and the general good, between interests, rights, and duties of men and groups in society; further, that power is something easily to be channeled, diffused, utilized for the common good, and that it can ultimately be eliminated altogether from political relationships. The distinction is thus not simply one

between thought concerned with the actual and the ideal, “what is” and “what ought to be.” It is true that Realism, frequently, is more concerned with description and analysis of what is than with political ideals, while Idealism often neglects factual phenomena for political ideals. But Realism may well, and often does, glorify “realist” trends as the desirable ones, while Idealism may take notice of power phenomena. The distinction is rather one of emphasis: Realist thought is determined by an insight into the overpowering impact of the security factor and the ensuing power-political, oligarchic, authoritarian, and similar trends and tendencies in society and politics, whatever its ultimate conclusion and advocacy. Idealist thought, on the other hand, tends to concentrate on conditions and solutions which are supposed to overcome the egoistic instincts and attitudes of individuals and groups in favor of considerations beyond mere security and self-interest. It therefore usually appears in one or another form of individualism, humanism, liberalism, pacifism, anarchism, internationalism—in short, as one of the ideologies in favor of limiting (or, more radically, eliminating) the power and authority which organized groups claim over men. As one author has expressed it, if “the children of darkness” are realists, pessimists, and cynics, the “children of light” sin through a facile optimism that renders them blind and sentimental.<sup>1</sup>

The distinction here suggested, while frankly inadequate in the realm of more refined political theory, seems to be a fertile one for the study of the great social and political movements of history. Its importance becomes evident when one starts to analyze the characteristic attitude-patterns and emotions of leaders and followers in such movements. Either the approach has been expressive of a utopian and often chiliastic Political Idealism, or—when disillusionment with the ideal’s ability to mold the “realist” facts frustrates expectations—it has taken refuge in an equally extreme, power-political and power-glorifying Political Realism. This fatal reversal time and again has constituted the tragedy of Political Idealism, which, paradoxically, has its time of greatness when its ideals are unfulfilled, when it is in opposition to out-dated political systems and the tide of the times swells it toward victory. It degenerates as soon as it attains its final goal; and in victory it dies. One is tempted to sum up the history of the great modern social and political movements as the story of the credos of Political Idealism and their successive failures in the face of the facts observed and acclaimed by Political Realism. Nowhere, perhaps, has this been more striking than in the field of the relations among the “sovereign” units of organization and power, *i.e.*, in modern times, in the “international” realm . . .

## Note

- 1 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense* (New York: Scribner, 1944).

# The pole of power and the pole of indifference

*Arnold Wolfers*

From: *World Politics* 4 (October 1951): 39–63.

In international relations, two opposing schools of thought have fought each other throughout the modern age. Ever since Machiavelli published the *Prince*, his “realistic” views have shocked “idealist” thinkers. As a battle of the mind, fought by and large outside the political arena, the dispute between the two schools was of great concern to philosophers and moralists; but not until Woodrow Wilson set out to bring Utopia down to earth did it become a political issue of the first magnitude. For the first time, the responsible head of one of the leading powers acted as though the world were on the verge of crossing the threshold from sordid “power politics” to a “new era” in which the admonitions of the idealist philosophers would suddenly become the political order of the day.

No amount of disillusionment has been able to wipe out the deep marks left by the outburst of idealist enthusiasm which Woodrow Wilson’s leadership evoked. Today more than ever American statesmen and the American public find themselves torn between the conflicting pulls of idealist and realist thought. Often the same event—as the war in Korea has vividly demonstrated—is interpreted simultaneously in terms of both schools, as an incident in the age-old struggle for power on the one hand, as a great venture in community action against an aggressor on the other.

This puts the theoretical analyst in something of a predicament. When interest in a theory of international politics became alive in the United States in the mid-thirties, it did so as part and parcel of a reaction which set in at the time against the prevailing optimistic Wilsonian school.<sup>1</sup> Machiavelli rather than Wilson became the patron saint of the new venture. But, today, the “realist” engaged in theoretical pursuits finds himself swimming against the stream, and a powerful stream it is when leaders of both political parties insist that American foreign policy centers on the United Nations and collective security. There is little in realist thought—beyond the tools to debunk many popular idealist notions—to suggest that organizations and ideologies transcending national boundaries deserve more than marginal attention. He has all the more reason, then, to reassess his own position in relation to the two schools and to seek to discover whether there may not be some unexplored terrain that lies beyond their controversy.<sup>2</sup>

The realist image of the world has been presented in its essential features by a number of authors concerned with the theory of international politics. In its pure form it is based on the proposition that “states seek to enhance their power.” In this brief statement are implicit the major assumptions of realist thought.

States are conceived as the sole actors in the international arena. Operating as a group of sovereign entities, they constitute a multistate system. The analogy of a set of billiard balls or chess figures comes to mind. All the units of the system behave essentially in the same manner; their goal is to enhance if not to maximize their power. This means that

each of them must be acting with a single mind and single will; in this respect they resemble the Princes of the Renaissance about whom Machiavelli wrote. Like them, too, they are completely separate from each other, with no affinities or bonds of community interfering with their egotistical pursuit of power. They are competitors for power, engaged in a continuous and inescapable struggle for survival. This makes them all potential if not actual enemies; there can be no amity between them, unless it be an alignment against a common foe.

Under these conditions the expectation of violence and even of annihilation is ever present. To forget it and thus to fail in the concern for enhanced power spells the doom of a state. This does not mean constant open warfare; expansion of power at the expense of others will not take place if there is enough counterpower to deter or to stop states from undertaking it. Though no state is interested in a mere balance of power, the efforts of all states to maximize power may lead to equilibrium. If and when that happens, there is "peace" or, more exactly, a condition of stalemate or truce. Under the conditions described here, this balancing of power process is the only available "peace" strategy.

While few would deny that the picture presented in these sweeping generalizations resembles the world we are living in at this time, it would not have passed for more than a caricature at other times. International relations within the Western world in the twenties or within the inter-American system today cannot be fully understood in terms either of balanced power or an all-out struggle for survival. This does not preclude the possibility that the "pure power model" of the realists can render service at least as an initial working hypothesis. The actual world might never fully comply with the postulates of the model, yet to the extent to which it did, consequences deduced within its context would apply to the real world. Countries engaged in a race to enhance their power could, for example, be expected to align themselves in disrespect of earlier "friendships" or ideological affinities; expansion would be sure to take place wherever a power vacuum existed.

Of course, no such approximation of reality to "pure power conditions" can be taken for granted. It presupposes that the basic "realist" contention about state behavior is truly realistic. If an insatiable quest for power were not the rule, but represented instead an abnormality or marginal case, developments in the world might deviate drastically from those which the model leads one to expect. Peace strategies other than the balancing process might have a chance of success.

Realist scholars have sought to explain why it is that states do in fact behave as postulated or why they are compelled to do so. They have offered two different explanations. According to the first, human nature is such that men, as individuals and as nations, act like beasts of prey, driven by an insatiable lust for power or *animus dominandi*. Their will to power, moreover, when transferred from small and frustrated individuals to the collectivity of the state, takes on greater dimensions and generates an all-round struggle for survival.<sup>3</sup>

According to the second explanation, which is gaining adherents, the quest for power is due not to any desire for power as such, but to a general human craving for security.<sup>4</sup> The insecurity of an anarchical system of multiple sovereignty places the actors under compulsion to seek maximum power even though it run counter to their real desires. By a tragic irony, then, all actors find themselves compelled to do for the sake of security what, in bringing about an all-round struggle for survival, leads to greater insecurity. This "vicious circle theory" makes statesmen and people look less vicious than the *animus dominandi* theory; what it does is to substitute tragedy for evil and to replace the "mad Caesar," as Lasswell calls the *homo politicus* of the pure power model, by the "hysterical Caesar" who, haunted by fear, pursues the will-o'-the-wisp of absolute security.

The validity of these explanations of an alleged uniform behavior of states toward power need not be discussed here, because the realist scholars who started out with the assumption of such uniformity have not stuck to it after descending from the high level of abstraction of their initial propositions to the lower levels where the shape of actual things can be apprehended. All of them have found it necessary to "deviate" from their original assumption to the point of distinguishing between at least two categories of states with different attitudes toward power.

Few have stated more emphatically than Morgenthau that in international relations "power is pitted against power for survival and supremacy."<sup>5</sup> But more recently he has drawn a sharp distinction between two types of states, the "status quo powers" and the "imperialist powers." Of the former, he says that their policy tends "toward keeping power and not toward changing the distribution of power"; of the latter, that they aim "at acquiring more power."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Frederick Schumann starts out with the assertion that in international politics "power is sought as an end in itself," but then goes on to differentiate between "satiated" and "unsatiated" states. His statements that "each state left to itself tends to extend its power over as wide a field as possible" and that "enhancement of state power is always the goal" are contradicted, it would seem, by his subsequent contention that states which benefit from the established status quo naturally seek "to preserve that from which they benefit," in contrast to those "which feel humiliated, hampered and oppressed by the status quo."<sup>7</sup> The authors of another recent text, Strausz-Hupé and Possony, follow a similar line. After stating at the outset that "foreign policy aims at the acquisition of optimum—and sometimes of maximum—power," the optimum remaining undefined, they go on to define, as a special type, the "natural aggressors" who in contrast to other states are "driven by a particularly pronounced dynamism, i.e., urge toward power accumulation."<sup>8</sup> Finally, Spykman, who did much to introduce the pure power hypothesis into the contemporary American discussion, deviates from his opening statement, according to which "the improvement of the relative power position becomes the primary objective of the . . . external policy of states," by speaking of the "dynamic state" which, as he puts it, "rarely sets modest limits to its power aims."<sup>9</sup> This implies that nondynamic states, on the contrary, do set such "modest limits."<sup>10</sup>

One consequence of distinctions such as these is worth mentioning. They rob theory of the determinate and predictive character that seemed to give the pure power hypothesis its peculiar value. It can now no longer be said of the actual world, e.g., that a power vacuum cannot exist for any length of time; a vacuum surrounded by "satiated" or "status quo" states would remain as it is unless its existence were to change the character of these states and put them in the category of "imperialist," "unsatiated," or "dynamic" states.

The idealist model, if such there be, cannot be as easily derived from writings or statements of exponents of the idealist school itself. This school has been anything but theory-minded. Its attention has been focused on peace strategy and on blueprints for a better world. However, it would have made no sense for idealists to proffer advice on policy if they had held no general views about the existing world which permitted them to regard as practical the policies they sought to promote. As a matter of fact, Woodrow Wilson himself, with his predilection for broad generalizations, has expressed on one occasion or another all the main tenets of the "Wilsonian" school.

One feature of the idealist image strikes the eye because of its contrast to the realist view. Here the basic propositions deal not with states, but with individuals, with peoples or with mankind. The idealist seems to be looking out not on a multistate system with its separate national entities, but on a nascent world community and the people who

make it up. This precludes from the start that the emphasis be placed on national quests for power or on the struggle for power among nations. Instead, the accent is either on the "common purpose of enlightened mankind"<sup>11</sup> or on the common values which men hold as individuals. Because the vast majority of men are assumed to value the same things—such as individual freedom, the right to govern themselves, the safety of their homeland, and above all the absence of violence—it is concluded that there can exist no basic conflict between them even as nations. If it were not for extraneous interference—and a remediable measure of ignorance and misunderstanding—there would be harmony, peace, and a complete absence of concern for national power. "I sometimes think," said Wilson, "that . . . no people ever went to war with another people." But he goes on to say that "governments have gone to war" with one another, thereby pointing to the darker side of the idealist picture.<sup>12</sup>

Only a dreamer could mistake for the existing order the vision of a world of independent nations in which there is no conflict, nor any drives for power. The idealist school does not do so. It not only fully recognizes the continued presence or threat of "power politics," but considers this discrepancy between "what is" and "what should and will be" as the crucial moral and political issue of international relations. The explanation for it is believed to lie in the operation of evil forces which violate the peace and law of the community . . .

The two schools are obviously far apart, if not diametrically opposed on many issues. Yet, despite striking differences, their views are closely related to each other, at least in one significant respect. Both approach international politics on the same level—which might briefly be called the power level—though they approach it from opposite ends.<sup>13</sup> By way of simplification, it can be said that while the realist is primarily interested in the quest for power—and its culmination in the resort to violence—as the essence of all politics among nations, the idealist is concerned above all with its elimination. On this level there can be no meeting of the minds. But the question arises whether to start off with the quest and struggle for power does not mean tying up the horse at its tail.

Normally, power is a means to other ends and not an end in itself. Where it becomes an end, as it does in the case of the "mad Caesars," one is faced with what Toynbee would call an "enormity." Therefore, to treat the quest for power, positively or negatively, outside the context of ends and purposes which it is expected to serve, robs it of any intelligible meaning and, by the way, also makes it impossible to judge its appropriateness or excessiveness. It is as if an economist, in developing economic theory, were to concentrate on the accumulation and expenditure of money. He could not avoid painting a picture of a world of misers or spendthrifts, as the political scientist on the power level can see little but a world of insatiably power-hungry or unconditionally power-hostile political actors.<sup>14</sup>

One gets a very different picture, as the further discussion should show, if one considers first the values and purposes for the sake of which policy-makers seek to accumulate or use national power, as they may also seek alternative or supplementary means.

This suggests beginning with a "theory of ends" and proceeding from there to the analysis of the quest for power as it develops in conjunction with and under the impact of the ends it is meant to promote. It must be kept in mind, however, that one is not dealing with a simple cause-and-effect relationship. The degree to which power is available or attainable frequently affects the choice of ends. Prudent policy-makers will keep their ends and aspirations safely within the power which their country possesses or is ready and willing to muster.<sup>15</sup> Statesmen with a respect for moral principles, or under pressure from people who have such respect, may hesitate to pursue goals which demand the sacrifice of these principles or of other values in the process of power accumulation or use.<sup>16</sup>



There is little reason to expect that all actors on the international stage will orientate themselves uniformly toward one and the same goal, whether it be peace, security, or “power as an end in itself.” However, the possibility will have to be considered that they may be operating under some form of “compulsion” which may force them in the long run to fall in line with each other.

States are not single-purpose organizations like hospitals, golf clubs, or banking establishments.<sup>17</sup> At one and the same time people expect from them not only external security, but such widely differing things as colonial conquest, better control over foreign markets, freedom for the individual, and international lawfulness. Between goals such as these, relatively scarce means must be parceled out in order of preference and by a constant process of weighing, comparing, and computing of values. Because policy-makers, like all men, seek to maximize value in accordance with ever-fluctuating value patterns, one would anticipate great variation in their choice unless something compelled them to conform.<sup>18</sup>

The number of conceivable ends is much larger than is indicated by broad categories such as “security,” “aggrandizement,” or “international order.” Policy-makers must decide whether a specific increment of security is worth the specific additional deprivations which its attainment through power requires. However, for purposes of analysis it is permissible to limit the discussion to a few representative types of goals. It need only be kept in mind that these typical bundles of related ends are not sharply divided from one another and that no actor is likely to be found pursuing a single type of objectives all the time. He may be out for security today, for conquest tomorrow.

The goals of foreign policy can be classified under the three headings of “goals of national self-extension,” “goals of national self-preservation,” and “goals of national self-abnegation.” For actors other than states, corresponding categories would have to be chosen.<sup>19</sup>

The term “self-extension” is not used here in a derogatory sense, although some goals which belong in this category may deserve moral condemnation. It is meant to cover all policy objectives expressing a demand for values not already enjoyed, and thus a demand for a change of the status quo. The objectives may vary widely. The aim may be more “power as an end in itself” or domination over other peoples or territorial expansion; but it may also represent a quest for the return of lost territory, or the redress of legitimate grievances, such as termination of unjust discriminations, the emancipation from foreign control or imposition on others of an ideology or way of life.<sup>20</sup>

Self-preservation is meant to stand for all demands pointing toward the maintenance, protection, or defense of the existing distribution of values, usually called the status quo. The term “self-preservation” is not without ambiguity. The national “self” which states seek to preserve can undergo a wide variety of interpretations. It may be considered to include only national independence and the territorial integrity of the homeland; or it may be held to embrace a whole catalogue of “vital interests,” from safety belts and influence zones to investments and nationals abroad. Another variable makes the notion of self-preservation even more elusive and therefore often convenient as a cloak for other purposes. To preserve possessions does not merely mean to defend them when they are actually under attack. Status quo powers regularly demand that the threat of such attack be reduced at least to the point of giving them a reasonable sense of security.

Thus, the quest for security—the preservation goal *par excellence*—points beyond mere maintenance and defense.<sup>21</sup> It can become so ambitious as to transform itself into a goal of unlimited self-extension. A country pursuing the mirage of absolute security could not stop at less than world domination today.<sup>22</sup> A change to self-extension in the name of security

often occurs at the close of a war. Victims of attack who were entirely satisfied before hostilities started are rarely content, if victorious, to return to the *status quo ante*.

Self-abnegation, finally, is meant to include all goals transcending—if not sacrificing—the “national interest,” in any meaningful sense of the term. It is the goal of those who place a higher value on such ends as international solidarity, lawfulness, rectitude, or peace than even on national security and self-preservation. It is also the goal of individuals, groups, or regimes who at the expense of the nation as a whole use their influence within the decision-making process to promote what might be called “subnational” interests . . .

Now let us suppose that a government has picked its objective or objectives and has also decided to rely on the accumulation and use of power as the chief means of reaching its goal. We can then ask ourselves what will determine the scope of its quest for power. Would it not stand to reason—provided the government in question was acting rationally—that it would seek to preserve or acquire as much power as appeared adequate to assure the success of its policy? It would not aim at a higher level of power, because every increment adds to the burdens the country has to bear, cuts down on the chances of attaining other objectives, and tends to provoke counteraction. To seek less than adequate power would mean giving up the chance of attaining one’s goal.

Because adequacy is a matter of subjective estimates, the factors which influence these estimates are of major interest. Two countries with the same goals and acting under similar circumstances may differ widely in their views on adequacy of power. But this need not invalidate some general theses concerning the relationship between the main categories of policy goals and the quest for power.

Goals of national self-abnegation—provided they are not set by subnational groups parading their interests as the “national interest”—call for the approval and support of more than a single nation. Accumulation, show, or use of national power are likely to defeat rather than to promote such ends. Nations pursuing ends that fall into this category—including the end of eliminating “power politics”!—will tend to play down their own national power or to reduce it. “Disarmament by example” pursued by Britain prior to 1932 was a way of trying to promote world peace by a policy of self-abnegation.

Obviously, cases will be rare in which for the sake of goals of self-abnegation a nation refuses to resort to power even when the inner core of the national self comes under serious threat of attack. This means that under stress self-preservation usually gains the upper hand. However, even then idealistic pressures at home in favor of self-denying policies may persist and either delay or reduce the effort to enhance defensive national power.

Statesmen and peoples who hold—or profess to hold—strong beliefs in universal causes, religious or ideological, are not always found to minimize reliance on national power. On the contrary, striking cases have become only too familiar in this age of revolutionary and ideological strife in which goals appearing to be of a self-transcending kind have revealed themselves as the most ambitious goals of self-extension. Whenever a nation goes out on a “crusade” for some universal cause, claiming to have a mission of imposing its ideas and institutions on others, there is practically no limit to the enhancement of national power it deems necessary. National power is looked upon or advertised here as the chosen instrument with which to bring salvation to mankind.

Goals of self-extension generally place an extremely high premium on the resort to power as a means. The chances of bringing about any major change of the international status quo by means other than power or even violence are slim indeed. Because it is also true that self-extension is often sought passionately if not fanatically and by actors of various sort and motivation, the tendency is toward frequent and intensive quests for enhanced power by

nations belonging to this category. No phenomenon in international politics calls for more study and attention.

Adequate power, in this instance, means power deemed adequate to overcome the power of resistance put up by those who desire to preserve things which they possess and cherish. Where such resistance is expected to be feeble, as it is when the demand is directed against weak or complacent and isolated countries, the nation seeking self-extension may be expected to be satisfied with far less than the maximum power for which it has potentialities. However, in view of the fact that other and stronger countries, as a rule, are awake to their interest in preserving well beyond their own borders the established distribution of values, resistance to change is usually not easy to break. It may be so forbidding as to deter countries from making the attempt. Thus, fervently "revisionist" Hungary after 1919 was sufficiently impressed by the power and resolution of the Little Entente not to attempt to regain her lost territories by means of power. The whole idea of the balance of power as a guarantor of peace rests on the assumption that the costs of adequate power for self-extension may at a certain point become excessive or prohibitive.

Many a "satisfied" country would better be called a country "resigned to non-extension," as can be seen whenever easy opportunities for gain present themselves. Not many belligerents, even if they were victims of attack when the war started, fail to come forth with "historic claims" and strategic demands once they are victorious. It would be exaggerated, however, to say that self-extension will always take place where no resistance is expected, or where no serious costs are involved. While Switzerland may stand alone in having refused to consider an increase of territory, even as a gift, it is well known how consistently influential groups in the United States Senate, and in the American public at large, have opposed territorial annexations.

Because of the fact that self-extension almost invariably calls for additional power, countries of the type discussed here tend to be the initiators of power competition and the resort to violence. Herein lies the significant kernel of truth in the idealist theory of aggression.<sup>23</sup> Cases are conceivable, of course, in which the initiative rests with a country concerned with self-preservation which starts enhancing its defensive power for fear of an imagined threat; the resort to violence, too, may be the preventive act of a nation that believes itself to be menaced by an attack on its own values or those of its friends.<sup>24</sup> If two countries are both eager to gain advantages at each other's expense, or are both haunted by fears and suspicions, it may be difficult to decide where the initiative lay and where the first move was made that led to a race for higher levels of power and ultimately to war.

Turning, finally, to the goals of self-preservation, they will be found to be most elusive when it comes to setting up general hypotheses concerning their effect on the quest for power. Depending on the circumstances, countries in this category may run the whole gamut from a frantic concern with the enhancement of power at one extreme to complete indifference to power at the other. Britain offers an excellent example of a swing of the pendulum from complacency under Baldwin and Chamberlain to spectacular and heroic total mobilization of power under Churchill.

The reason why self-preservation calls forth such a variety of attitudes toward power lies in the fact that countries which are satisfied to let things stand as they are have no immediate incentive for valuing power or for wishing to enhance it. Whether they become interested in power at all—and the extent to which they do—depends on the actions which they expect from others. It is a responsive interest which takes its cue from the threats, real or imagined, directed at things possessed and valued. If policy is rationally decided, the quest for power here increases and decreases in proportion to these external threats.

One can bring out the peculiarities of this responsive attitude most clearly if one starts out by postulating a situation in which all of the major actors are assumed to be concerned with nothing but self-preservation. In the mid-twenties, when the “revisionist” nations were still impotent, this situation was closely approximated. Under such conditions, policy-makers are inclined toward keeping the costs of power at a minimum and toward avoiding any move which might provoke a race for power from which, after all, they have nothing to gain. If there was no reason to fear that one or more within the group might switch to goals of self-extension, and particularly if there was no danger of dissatisfied and potentially strong countries outside the group regaining actual power, the estimates of what constitutes adequacy would drop very low. The unguarded border between Canada and this country serves as a striking reminder of the indifference to power in the relations between two nonextension-seeking and nondistrustful neighbors.<sup>25</sup>

The conditions postulated here describe a configuration in which peace strategies such as the idealist school advocated in the twenties would have an excellent chance of success, provided no country feared the early ascendancy of a presently impotent and dissatisfied nation. All would be interested in disarmament to the lowest level compatible with internal security, in the promotion of mutual confidence and understanding, and in the collective organization of “watchfulness.” Only hysteria could produce a race for power within a group of countries intent upon self-preservation. The chances are that the high degree of security which they would believe to be enjoying would lull them into a state of such indifference toward power that they might be overtaken by a self-extension-seeking outsider. So slow is the “security dilemma” in catching up with those who are content with mere security!

History does not indicate that conditions of all-round satisfaction are either frequent or persistent. They certainly are not in our age, which among other ways of creating dissatisfaction has produced a surprising contempt for the art of satisfying defeated enemies. As a consequence, threats to the established order are almost constantly forcing those who seek preservation of cherished values to muster power of resistance if they wish to assure the success of their defensive objective. In this sense, one can say that their quest for power is the result of external “compulsion.”

However, this “compulsion” is not some kind of mechanical force which would rob the actors of their freedom of choice. No decision-maker is forced by anything except his own value preferences or his conscience to defend by means of power either national independence or any other threatened values. There are plenty of Europeans today—and there may be European governments tomorrow—who prefer to risk their country’s freedom and institutions rather than embark on a policy of armed resistance which they consider hopeless or too costly. What the penalties are for not ceding to the “compulsion” is another question.

Those who interpret international politics as being essentially a struggle for survival, similar to the “survival of the fittest” in business competition or in the Darwinian world of competing animal species, are thereby suggesting that the penalty consists in the loss of independent existence. This has been true in some instances; but there is plenty of historical evidence to show that a threat to “existence,” of great powers at least, has occurred only in the exceptional though cataclysmic eruptions of revolutionary or imperialist ardor characteristic of a Napoleon or a Hitler.<sup>26</sup> In our era such eruptions have become not only frequent, but capable of spreading out over the entire globe and of drawing all nations into a single struggle for survival. There have been other times—and they cover much of the maligned history of European “power politics”—when the demands for self-extension, though ubiquitous as far as the major powers of the time were concerned, have remained

limited in scope. Even if successful, the penalties on the loser rarely ranged beyond such deprivations as the loss of a strip of territory or the shift of a neighboring country to a less friendly dynasty. Whether such limitation was imposed solely by the lack of means for more ambitious self-extension, or whether it also expressed a prudent and conservative spirit on the part of the decision-makers, cannot be discussed here. In any case, the contrast with the "struggles for survival" of an age of revolutionary and total wars is striking.

Even when the penalty is not annihilation—and defeat today, as in remote ages, may actually mean physical extermination—countries usually feel compelled by their judgment and conscience not to allow possessions they value to go by default. They may enhance and use their power in defense of everything from prestige and colonies to free institutions and moral principles. The loss of values for which a people is ready to fight and die becomes a "compelling" penalty. "Collective security," as practiced recently, can be understood as an effort not only to equal in scope and speed the power drive of the "initiators," but to bring the "free peoples" to a point where they will identify their "selves" with the entire non-Communist world and its institutions and feel compelled to fight for the preservation of their larger "selves" . . .

The realist school has merited its name for having appreciated the role which the quest for power plays in international politics, though it has devoted little attention to the policy goals from which this quest for power springs. It has recognized that a multistate system—a term which still properly designates the outstanding feature of contemporary international politics—is heavily slanted toward struggles for power. Lying somewhere within a continuum which stretches from the pole of an "all-out struggle for power" to the pole of an "all-round indifference to power," the actual world tends to be pulled more strongly toward the former. This is true, whether the realist *a priori* assumptions concerning a universal human hunger for power or of a "security dilemma" arising from *la condition humaine* are correct or not. The main reason lies in the ever-recurring new incentives to demands for change and the equally strong incentives to throw power in the path of such change. By a curious irony, the same readiness to resist through power which is the prerequisite of any competition for power may, if strong, quick-moving, and determined enough, prevent the struggle from degenerating into violence. This is what the realists have in mind when placing their hopes for peace on the balance of power.

It is quite possible that most of the great drives toward national and revolutionary self-extension which at intervals have thrown the world into struggles of sheer survival could not have been prevented by any means available to man. One can hardly escape a sense of fatalism if one asks oneself retrospectively whether the rise and aggressions of a Hitler could have been avoided. But this does not mean—as realist thought would seem to imply—that no influence can be brought to bear on policy-makers which would serve the interests of peace. Anything that bears on their value patterns and preferences, on their estimates of gains and deprivations, or on the scope of their identifications will, in principle, be able to affect the course of policy upon which they decide to embark.

It may be Utopian to expect that the causes accounting for resorts to power and power competition could ever be wholly eliminated—as it is Utopian to believe that defensive counterforce could be consistently held at sufficient strength to prevent the actual resort to violence; but there need be no resigned acceptance of the "enormity" of a continuous all-round struggle for survival. Through suitable policies, pressures, and appeals designed to attack the causes of intensive drives for enhanced power, the pulls toward the pole of all-round indifference to power can be strengthened. The main task of those engaged in developing a realistic theory of peace strategy is to discover policies and practices which



offer most promise of turning nations away from goals that point toward power competition and violence.

## Notes

- 1 See William T. R. Fox, "Interwar International Relations Research: The American Experience," *World Politics*, 2, no.1 (October 1949), pp. 67–79.
- 2 Not all authors can be classified as belonging clearly to one of the two schools, because the views which will be presented in sharp contrast are often found to shade over into each other. However, it is not difficult to discover in what direction a writer's main inclination lies. E. H. Carr (*The Twenty Years' Crisis*, London, 1941) makes a deliberate attempt to synthesize the tenets of both schools, which he calls Utopian and Realist. (See particularly p. 125.) I think it can be said, however, that he lets the realist come out on top.
- 3 See Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, Chicago, 1946, especially in the chapter on "selfishness and lust for power," pp. 191–201.
- 4 John H. Herz (*Political Realism and Political Idealism*, Chicago, 1951), who expounds the theory of what he calls the "security dilemma" with much skill and vigor, says that "Basically it is the mere instinct of self-preservation which . . . leads to competition for ever more power" (p. 4). This is the view held by Thomas Hobbes, which C. J. Friedrich discusses in *Inevitable Peace*, Cambridge, 1948, p. 126.
- 5 Morgenthau, *op.cit.*, p. 71.
- 6 Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, New York, 1948, p. 21. Actually, he adds a third type, described as a nation pursuing a policy of prestige. Prestige, however, in contrast to maintenance and acquisition of power, "is but rarely an end in itself," he says (p. 50); "it is rather an instrument through which the other two ends can be achieved."
- 7 Frederick L. Schuman, *International Politics*, 3rd ed., New York, 1941, pp. 262–63, 274–75, 279.
- 8 Robert Strausz-Hupé and Stefan T. Possony, *International Relations*, New York, 1950, pp. 2, 9.
- 9 Nicholas John Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics*, New York, 1942, pp. 18, 20.
- 10 Max Weber emphasizes the difference between more "isolationist" and more "expansive" powers, as well as their changing attitudes in his respect. (See *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. by H. H. Gerth and G. Wright Mills, New York, 1946, chapter VI on "Structures of Power," p. 159.) "For general reasons of power dynamics *per se*," he writes, "the Great Powers are often very expansive powers." "But," he continues, they "are not necessarily and not always oriented toward expansion." See also William T. R. Fox (*The Super-Powers*, New York, 1944) who distinguishes between the "quest for security (power not to be coerced)" of some nations and the "quest for domination (power to coerce)" of others.
- 11 *The Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson: War and Peace*, ed. by Ray S. Baker and William E. Dodd, New York, 1927, p. 259.
- 12 *President Wilson's State Papers and Addresses*, introd. by Albert Shaw, New York, 1918, p. 177.
- 13 The term "power" is used here and throughout this article in the restricted sense in which it occurs in the popular use of such word combinations as "power politics" or "struggle for power," meaning to cover the ability to coerce or, more precisely, to inflict deprivations on others. This leaves out other ways of exerting influence, e.g., by bestowing benefits which are not ordinarily connected with or condemned as "power politics." (See Harold and Margaret Sprout, in the new 2d rev. edition of *Foundations of National Power*, New York, 1951, p. 39, where they explain their reasons for choosing a much broader definition.) The term "resort to power" will be used to mean reliance on the ability to inflict deprivations, "resort to violence" as actual coercion by the use of physical force.
- 14 Some political scientists would exclude by definition from what they call "political" anything but the problems of power. But the consequence is that a "foreign policy" must then be called political in one respect and nonpolitical in all others, the latter including all policy ends other than power itself.
- 15 Walter Lippmann has consistently advocated such prudence. "The thesis of this book," he says in reference to his *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (Boston, 1943), "is that a foreign policy consists in bringing into balance, with a comfortable surplus of power in reserve, the nation's commitments and the nation's power. The constant preoccupation of the true statesman is to achieve and maintain this balance."

- 16 For some of the ethical problems involved, see my article on "Statesmanship and Moral Choice," *World Politics*, 1, no. 2 (January 1949), pp. 175–95.
- 17 In speaking of the actors on the international stage, I shall use the term "states" as a means of abbreviation. The real actors are aggregates of decision-makers acting in the name of states or nations, including in a varied order of influence such persons as statesmen, legislators, lobbyists, and common citizens. There are also, today, as there were in medieval times, actors other than states, like the Cominform, the Vatican, the United Nations, or the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, which one could not afford to ignore in any complete theory of international politics. One might call them subnational, transnational, and supranational centers of influence and often of power.
- 18 As Harold D. Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan put it in *Power and Society* (New Haven, 1950): "No generalizations can be made a priori concerning the scale of values of all groups and individuals. What the values are in a given situation must in principle be separately determined for each case." Though they state earlier that a certain element of invariance must be assumed to "make a political science possible," they cannot be pleading for the assumption that all actors uniformly prefer one single value, such as power. For they also say (p. 57) that: "It is impossible to assign a universally dominant role to some value or other."
- 19 There will be little room in the following to discuss the factors that account for the choice of goals by the decision-makers. There is need for much more study of these factors. Growing awareness that policy cannot arise except through choices and decisions of individuals has led recently to a tendency to stress the psychological factor. But it is probable that the understanding of national foreign policies, as well as any long-run predictions concerning such policies, will be found to depend on knowledge of antecedents to action that are more general and more constant than the psychological traits and predispositions of frequently changing individuals, or even of groups, elites, and nations. To give an illustration, the pressures which the Soviet Government has placed in recent years on Turkey could have been predicted, even at the time when Moscow disclaimed any future concern with Constantinople and the Straits, on the basis of a geopolitical and historical analysis of the environment in which the Kremlin acts today and acted in Czarist days. Spykman's prediction of 1942 (*op.cit.*, p. 469) that "a modern, vitalized and militarized China . . . is going to be a threat not only to Japan, but also to the position of the Western Powers in the Asiatic Mediterranean," which sounded almost blasphemous to some of his critics when it was made, could not have been made if it had depended on the knowledge of the future political fortunes, the psychology, and the doctrine of one who was then a little-known Communist agitator with the name of Mao Tse-tung.
- 20 The literature on the causes of imperialism is extensive. Studies have also been made bearing on such problems as the relationship between dictatorship and expansionist foreign policies; but one would wish studies like that of Edmond N. Cahn (*The Sense of Injustice*, New York, 1949) to be extended to the international field. For where is the "sense of injustice" more "alive with movement and warmth" (p. 13) and where is the "human animal" more "disposed to fight injustice" (p. 25) than in international relations? Status quo countries will continue to live in a fool's paradise if they fail to understand the deep and manifold causes which account for demands for change and self-extension even through violence.
- 21 I am employing the term "security" as it is used in the everyday language of statesmen to signify not "high value expectancy" generally—as Lasswell and Kaplan define the term (*op.cit.*, p. 61)—but high expectancy of value *preservation*. The two authors may have had the same thing in mind, because they specify that security means a realistic expectancy of *maintaining* influence. One would not say that Nazi Germany either came to be or came to feel more secure as her expectancy of successful self-extension through conquest of territory increased.
- 22 The degree of security-mindedness of different countries and of groups within countries depends on many circumstances which would be worth studying. Looking at the United States and France in recent times, it would seem as if countries become more ambitious in their desire for security either for having enjoyed a high degree of it over a long period or for having had much and recent experience with the sad consequences of insecurity. James Burnham in *The Struggle for the World* (New York, 1947) argues that in the atomic age, there can be no security short of world empire, with only two candidates for such empire available today. "In the course of the decision," he says, "both of the present antagonists may . . . be destroyed. But one of them must be" (pp. 134 f.).
- 23 See also Strausz-Hupé and Possony, *op.cit.*, p. 9.



- 24 "... a government with no appetite whatsoever," writes W. T. R. Fox ("Atomic Energy and International Relations," in *Technology and International Relations*, ed. by W. F. Ogburn. Chicago, 1949, p. 118), "may start a conflict if its leaders feel sure that the opponent has for a long time been unscrupulously trading on their general unwillingness to start a war."
- 25 W. T. R. Fox points out that "One state's security is not necessarily every other state's insecurity ... Greater security ... is an objective toward which it is at least conceivable that all states can move simultaneously" (*The Super-Powers*, p. 11).
- 26 See Morgenthau, *Scientific Man*, p. 107, on the difference between "the great international conflicts" and the "secondary conflicts."

### 3 Balance of power theory

Balance of power theory has a complicated relationship with the realist tradition. On the one hand (and hence this chapter), it is sometimes considered a separate stand-alone body of scholarship. On the other hand, with the exception of some versions of rise and fall realism, almost all realist theories include some elements of balancing behavior and/or an expectation that the system will tend toward balance. Because of this very substantial overlap, it is worth grappling with some of the complexities of balance of power theory, and appreciating some of the conceptual and theoretical difficulties.

Scholars commonly use the singular noun “theory” as a label for this body of scholarship, and for its elements that make appearances in a variety of realist research programs. At least fifty years ago, scholars noticed the wide range of scholarship described by this label. The polysemy problem was famously highlighted by Ernst B. Haas in his 1953 *World Politics* article, “The balance of power: Prescription, concept, or propaganda?” Haas notes that, depending on the author and his or her objectives, balance of power can mean at least eight different things. Some of these—such as equilibrium and preponderance, and peace and war—stand in direct contradiction to one another. Given its multiple meanings and the fact that scholars are rarely clear about how they are using the concept, coming to grips with balance of power theory can be an overwhelming task.

Rather than try to squeeze all balance of power theory into a single approach, the better solution is to appreciate this diversity and choose accordingly. As noted by Inis Claude,<sup>1</sup> there are multiple ways to conceptualize balance and balancing, and hence (despite the singular noun) several variants. In order to get past this ambiguity and to understand how balance of power theory has been used by contemporary realists, it is important to distinguish between “balance” as a system-level outcome (i.e. equilibrium in the international system) and “balancing” as the actions taken by states to countervail a growing threat. It is also useful to distinguish between the different variants of the theory, including automatic, manual, and dyadic balance of power theory. Automatic balance of power theory explains “balance” as a system-level outcome that occurs regardless of the intentions and actions of states. Manual balance of power theory, in contrast, argues that statesmen have an interest in establishing or maintaining equilibrium in the international system, and aim for that outcome. Finally, dyadic balance of power theory focuses on the relationship between states, and seeks to explain the “balancing” behaviors that are intended to counteract a growing threat.

Edward Vose Gulick’s description of Europe’s classic balance of power system is a well-known example of manual balance of power theory. According to Gulick, equilibrium in the European state system was established and maintained through the purposeful actions of statesmen who believed that state survival was best achieved through balanced power. Whenever the balance was upset, the states of Europe would engage in different forms of

balancing behavior, including war, with the stated purpose of restoring equilibrium. Thus, rather than being an unintended consequence of states interacting, equilibrium in the European system was the intended result of widespread balancing behavior.

The selection from Robert Jervis' book *System Effects* presents an automatic balance of power model that explains why the international system tends toward equilibrium regardless of the intentions of states. According to Jervis, the international system will tend toward a balance whenever four conditions are met: the system is composed of several independent units; states at a minimum want to survive; states are willing to ally with each other regardless of ideology or history; and war remains a legitimate foreign policy option. States do not have to desire an equilibrium or engage in balancing behavior for it to occur. Like Waltz's neorealism (see Chapter 4), Jervis sees system-level balance as the unintended consequence of self-regarding states operating in an anarchic environment.

Finally, in "Balancing on land and sea," Jack Levy and William Thompson offer a recent variant of balance of power theory that suggests that land powers—continental states with large armies—tend to provoke the formation of counterbalancing coalitions, while sea powers—insular states with big navies—do not. Given their interest in territorial expansion, Levy and Thompson argue that land powers are inherently more threatening than sea powers, which are primarily concerned with trade and dominating economic markets. Thus, as a land power grows, states will join forces to counterbalance its influence. Levy and Thompson's article can be framed as an example of a dyadic balance of power theory, because the authors explain "balancing" behaviors (mainly alliances) that states engage in to counteract a specific threat.

Although often treated as a separate body of scholarship, it is important to note that elements of balance of power theory have been the building blocks of almost every realist research program. Accordingly, we will be revisiting these concepts when in later chapters we encounter influential and important realist theories about international politics and state behavior.

## **Note**

- 1 Inis Claude, *Power and International Relations* (New York: Random House, 1962).

# The balance of power

## Prescription, concept, or propaganda?

*Ernst B. Haas*

From: *World Politics* 5, no. 4 (July 1953): 442–77.

“The Soviet Union is now engaged in an audacious attempt to upset the established balance of power prevailing in Europe.” This statement was used by C. L. Sulzberger, writing in the *New York Times* for March 23, 1952, to open a discussion of the Soviet offer to establish a unified and neutral Germany. It symbolizes the startling renaissance of the balance of power concept in recent years not only in the pages of learned journals, but in the daily press and in radio as well. This rebirth is probably attributable to the effort to reconsider the notions concerning international relations generally held during the League of Nations period, notions which emphasized open diplomacy, collective security, and the use of arbitration instead of unilateral force. The apparent futility of these methods seemed to call for the reintroduction of more meaningful concepts into the analysis of international affairs, and the balance of power thus reappeared as part of the general trend to re-establish the primacy of power as the key to the understanding of interstate relations. There would be no difficulty in this development if the term “balance of power” were free from philological, semantic, and theoretical confusion. Unfortunately, it is not. The term is defined differently by different writers; it is used in varying senses, even if not defined exactly at all; and, finally, it is the focal concept in several quite distinct theories of international relations . . .

### Classification of verbal meanings

. . . Among the various meanings of the term “balance of power,” one of the more common is a mere factual description of the distribution of political power in the international scene at any one time. But, in another sense, the term is used to mean a theoretical principle acting as a guide to foreign policy-making in any and all international situations, so that the preponderance of any one state may be avoided. Expanding this notion and assuming that almost all states guide their policies by this principle, a general system of the balance of power is thought to come about, a system in which each participating state has a certain role. Such a system may take the form of two or more power blocs in mutual opposition to each other and it may exist with or without the benefit of a balancer, i.e., a state willing and able to throw its weight on either scale of the balance, to speak in terms of the classical metaphor, and thus presumably bring about the diplomatic or military victory of the bloc so supported, or possibly prevent any change in existing conditions. In addition to these various shades of theoretical meaning implying some sort of system, the term “balance of power” has frequently been used to describe the existence of a political equilibrium, i.e., such a distribution of power that each state (or each major state) is the approximate equal of every other. On the other hand, the term is commonly employed to connote the exact opposite of the equilibrium notion; it then comes to be identical with a notion of hegemony. Still other

commentators insist on the presence of general historical laws of the balance of power, a notion to which the term “natural law” has been given by some. By this they mean that the search for hegemony by one state will inevitably be met by a coalition of all other states, thus forming a “counterweight” against political preponderance and tending to re-establish the *status quo ante*. And, finally, balance of power very frequently means power politics generally and the establishment of certain military and strategic conditions specifically. Some writers equate the term with peace, others with war . . .

(1) *Balance meaning “Distribution of Power.”* The simplest and most commonly found use of the term “balance of power” occurs in plain descriptive statements. Thus when Bolingbroke wrote that “Our Charles the First was no great politician, and yet he seemed to discern that the balance of power was turning in favor of France, some years before the treaty of Westphalia . . .,”<sup>1</sup> he was merely saying that the Stuart ruler was noticing that the power of France was increasing as compared to that of Britain . . . Balance of power, in usages such as these, means no more than distribution of power. It does not connote any “balancing” of weights at all. When a statesman says that the “balance of power has shifted,” he wants to say that his opponent has grown more powerful than was the case previously.

(2) *Balance meaning “Equilibrium.”* An imposing array of politicians and political scientists has urged that the term “balance of power” means what it seems to imply to the uninitiated layman: an exact equilibrium of power between two or more contending parties . . .

. . . Lasswell speaks of a balancing of power rather than a “balance,” since the attempt toward equilibrium can never be a wholly successful one, owing to various non-objective factors which interfere with scientific balancing. Lasswell rounds out the conventional presentation of the search for equilibrium by pointing to the domestic political process as offering a parallel spectacle. Furthermore, he establishes a relationship between the domestic and international balancing processes by describing liaison and support between various societal groups in one state, working with or against certain other groups in the opposing state or in the “balancer” state.

(3) *Balance meaning “Hegemony.”* This analysis leads easily to the meaning of balance of power equivalent to hegemony. Examples from the literature are numerous and only two will be given: one from the eighteenth century and one modern. Thus, the Count of Hauterive, a pamphleteer for Napoleon I, argued that the balance of power demanded Napoleon’s breaking the Treaty of Campo Formio, to enable France to bring about a confederation of the continent against England and in this way reduce the hegemonial superiority of Britain on the seas and, incidentally, establish the hegemony of France.<sup>2</sup> And Napoleon himself, in December of 1813, expressed his desire for a peace “based on the balance of rights and interests!”<sup>3</sup>

Nicholas Spykman also understood the balance of power as implying a search for hegemony. His thesis—that all states seek a hegemonial position and therefore are in more or less continual conflict with each other—has for its natural corollary that this conflict, if it stops short of total war, has to result in some sort of equilibrium. This, however, can never be stable, because statesmen do not seek “balance” but hegemony:

The truth of the matter is that states are interested only in a balance which is in their favor. Not an equilibrium, but a generous margin is their objective. There is no real security in being just as strong as a potential enemy; there is security only in being a little stronger. There is no possibility of action if one’s strength is fully checked; there is a chance for a positive foreign policy only if there is a margin of force which can be

freely used. Whatever the theory and the rationalization, the practical objective is the constant improvement of the state's own relative power position. The balance desired is the one which neutralizes other states, leaving the home state free to be the deciding force and the deciding voice.<sup>4</sup>

Should equilibrium be attained at one point, it would immediately be wiped out by the search for slight superiority.

(4) *Balance meaning "Stability" and "Peace."* A number of analysts have persisted in identifying what they have called the "balance of power" with the kind of idyllic world they desire to establish. They do not mean that the balance of power is a method for realizing peace and stability, but that peace and stability are identical with a balance of power. Typical of this approach is Francis Gould Leckie.<sup>5</sup> Leckie's tome is free from the usual recommendations of balancing the power of state A against state B, with states C and D holding the balance between them. He confines himself to recommending that feudal succession law be abolished and Europe go in for large-scale colonization in Africa and America, thus creating a "stable balance of power." At other times he does, however, lapse into more conventional meanings of the balance—an inconsistency unfortunately found all too frequently in these writings. Similarly, Olof Höijer tends to use the term in this sense, arguing that whenever the powers decided peace was desirable and should be maintained on a given issue—e.g., the London Conference of 1830–1839—a true balance of power existed, though to some analysts it might appear as if here the term "concert" might be more appropriate.<sup>6</sup>

(5) *Balance meaning "Instability" and "War."* Occasionally, by contrast, we find writers using the term "balance of power" as being synonymous with the very kind of world conditions they abhor: war, intervention, competition, and instability. Thus the Abbé de Pradt argued that the balance of power means war, while peace is identical with the settling of all issues on their moral, economic, and ethnographic merits.<sup>7</sup> This approach is also typical of that extraordinary eighteenth-century writer, Johann Gottlob Justi, of Cobden and Bright, of the elder Mirabeau, and of Kant, who called the balance of power a *Hirngespinnst* [*trans.* Chimera].<sup>8</sup> It is true of de Pradt, however, that he tends to identify "balance of power" with power politics generally, a very common identification indeed.

(6) *Balance meaning "Power Politics" generally.* Edmund Waller once exclaimed:

Heav'n that has plac'd this island to give law,  
To balance Europe and her states to awe.

"Balance" in this jingle comes to mean the exertion of power pure and simple. And as the anonymous author of *The Present State of Europe* (ed. of 1757) stated, "The struggle for the balance of power, in effect, is the struggle for power."<sup>9</sup> Power, politics of pure power, *Realpolitik*, and the balance of power are here merged into one concept, the concept that state survival in a competitive international world demands the use of power uninhibited by moral considerations . . .

This formulation of the term is commonly expanded to include all the factors making for state power, and especially military installations, military potentials, and strategic positions. State A's position in the balance of power is "good" after the construction of a given line of fortresses, or "bad" if that line is obliterated by boundary changes. The point need not be labored. Use of the term "balance of power" in this very commonly employed meaning signifies the over-all power position of states in an international scene dominated by power

politics. States are pictured as fighting for power, and only for power—for whatever reasons—and the struggle in or for a balance of power is equivalent to the power political process as a whole. Balance of power here is not to be understood as a refinement of the general process of power politics, but as being identical with it.

(7) *Balance as implying a "Universal Law of History."* John Bassett Moore once wrote that

What is called the balance of power is merely a manifestation of the primitive instinct of "self-defense," which tends to produce combinations in all human affairs, national as well as international, and which so often manifests itself in aggression. Not only was the Civil War in the United States the result of a contest over the balance of power but the fact is notorious that certain sections of the country have, during past generations, constantly found themselves in general relations of mutual support because of a continuing common interest in a single question.<sup>10</sup>

The point of departure of these usages is again the assumed inevitable and natural struggle among states for preponderance, and the equally natural resistance to such attempts. Given these two considerations, it follows that as long as they continue in force, there is bound to be a "balance" of states seeking aggrandizement and states opposing that search. In Frederick L. Schuman's version of the balance, there is a tendency for all revisionist states to line up against the ones anxious to conserve given treaties, and in Professor Morgenthau's analysis the "imperialistic" states tend to line up against those defending the status quo, producing a balance in the process.<sup>11</sup> It is often inherent in this formulation to consider Europe as a great "confederation" unified by homogeneous morals and religion and tied together by international law. The balance of power struggle, equally, is part of that system and tends toward its preservation by avoiding the hegemony of a single member. And, of course, it is in this formulation that the analogy to the mechanical balance is most frequently found.

... Unconscious moderation, temporarily, restrains deliberate greed. A general dialectic of power relationships is thus created in which balances of power play a definite part. However, no balance is permanent and is subject to change at a moment's notice. It guarantees neither peace nor law; in fact, it implies war and its own destruction whenever a former counterweight state acquires sufficient power to challenge the very balance which it was called upon to maintain.

(8) *Balance as a "System" and "Guide" to policy-making.* In the formulation of the balance of power as a universal law of history there was an element of instinctive, unconscious, and unplanned behavior which would defy any analysis in terms of conscious human motivations. Statesmen were represented as acting in accordance with the prescriptions of the balance of power as if they were the unconscious pawns of some invisible hand, to borrow a phrase from Adam Smith. In the formulation of the balance of power as a system of political organization and guide to policy-making, emphasis is firmly thrown on conscious and deliberate behavior and decision-making.

... Statesmen ever since Thucydides, said Hume, have made good policy when they checked in due time, through alliances and coalition wars, the growth of a state potentially able to absorb them all, and made bad policy when they ignored this guiding principle.<sup>12</sup> ... The guide, therefore, merely tells statesmen to prevent the growth of any state which, merely because of its power, is potentially able to absorb or limit their own states. There is a good deal of diplomatic evidence to support this contention, in that some leaders have actually made their decision to go to war on just these grounds ...



... How does the balance of power then become a system? It stands to reason that if all the states of Europe (or the world) were to base their policies on the prescription of the balance of power, a "system" would come about in the sense that the least movement toward hegemony by one would immediately result in the coalition of the other states into an opposing alliance. The ever-present readiness to do just that and the constant vigilance declared necessary to prevent any one state's hegemony would in themselves produce this system of the balance of power. It is at this point that the theory grows more fanciful. The earlier doctrines, based on the guide-and-system idea, contented themselves with the so-called simple balance. The analogy is that of a pair of scales, and the supposition was that there would be only two major states, with their satellites, in the "system." The idea of a strict physical equilibrium—or slight hegemony—would then apply. Later doctrines, however, introduced the notion of the complex balance, on the analogy of the chandelier. More than two states, plus satellites, were postulated, and the necessity for preserving the freedom of all from the lust for dominance by any one was thought to involve the setting into motion of various weights and counterweights on all sides of the chandelier. It is this system which is closely related to the idea of the "balancer," introduced into the theory by British writers during the seventeenth century and a commonplace in the eighteenth. It implied, of course, the existence of powers sufficiently unconcerned by the merits of whatever the issue of the crisis was to be willing to "add their weight" to whichever side was the weaker, and thus prevent the possible victory—and implied hegemony—of the stronger. The balance of power considered as a guide was the reasoning process at the base of the system . . .

## Notes

- 1 Bolingbroke, *Works*, Philadelphia, 1841, II, p. 257.
- 2 Hauterive, *De l'état de la France à la fin de l'an VIII*, cited in A. Stern, "Das politische Gleichgewicht," *Archiv für Politik und Geschichte*, IV (1923), pp. 48–49.
- 3 L. Donnadieu, *Essai sur la théorie d'équilibre*, Paris, 1900, p. 111.
- 4 N. Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics*, New York, 1942, pp. 21–25.
- 5 F. G. Leckie, *An Historical Research into the Nature of the Balance of Power in Europe*, London, 1817, pp. 4, 242ff., 292, 303, 350ff.
- 6 O. Höijer, *La théorie de l'équilibre et le droit des gens*, Paris, 1917, pp. 52–59.
- 7 D. de Pradt, *Du Congrès de Vienne*, Paris, 1815, I, pp. 67–69, 75ff., 84ff., 95, 104.
- 8 Stern, *op.cit.*, pp. 31–34.
- 9 L. Bucher, "Über politische Künstaudrucke. II. Politisches Gleichgewicht," *Deutsche Reue*, XII (1887), pp. 333–39.
- 10 J. B. Moore, *International Law and Some Current Illusions*, New York, 1924, p. 310.
- 11 H. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, New York, 1948; also F. L. Schuman, *International Politics*, New York, 1941, pp. 281ff.
- 12 D. Hume, "On the Balance of Power," *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, London, 1889, I, pp. 352–53.

# Aims

*Edward Vose Gulick*

From: *Europe's Classical Balance of Power: A Case History of the Theory and Practice of One of the Great Concepts of European Statecraft* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., [1955] 1967), Chapter 2.

No one who has watched a boat being built would regard a barnacle as essential to its structure. In similar fashion, once the edifice of aims of the balance of power is exposed, the observer, seeing what its main elements are, can easily distinguish what is germane from what is incidental.

## **Preserve independence and secure survival**

The basic aim of the balance of power was to insure the survival of independent states. This may be taken as fundamental to the classical balance-of-power system and should be distinguished from those goals, such as “peace” and (to a lesser degree) the “status quo,” which were incidental to it.<sup>1</sup> Writers on the balance of power expressed their recognition of this basic aim in various ways. Brougham, for example, held that “the whole object of the [balance of power] system is to maintain unimpaired the independence of nations.”<sup>2</sup> Heeren spoke of the balance of power as the “mutual preservation of freedom and independence, by guarding against the preponderance and usurpation of an individual.”<sup>3</sup> Vattel, in elucidating the “general Principles of the Duties of a Nation to Itself,” summarized them with the dictum: “To preserve and perfect one’s existence is the sum of all duties to self.”<sup>4</sup> We find in all three a repeated emphasis on the primacy of the survival of independent states. Similarly, where the old British Mutiny Act provided for the levy of troops, it was associating an instrument of war (the levy) with the two ideas of “the Safety of the United Kingdom . . . and the Preservation of the Balance of Power in Europe,” and was by implication asserting that survival took precedence over peace as an aim of the balance of power.<sup>5</sup>

## **Preserve the state system**

Taking the survival of the independent state as his base, the equilibrist erected his aims by piling two more blocks on top of the first. The second block consisted of the argument that the best way to preserve the individual state was to preserve the system of which it was a part. Self-interest, according to this line of reasoning, could best be pursued by attention to group interest. By preserving the state system you would preserve the parts thereof. For a superb illustration of this second block, carefully aligned and cemented by the master mason himself, we look at a famous passage in the *Mémoires* of Prince Metternich, creator and preserver of intricately balanced structures:

*Politics* is the science of the vital interests of States in its widest meaning. Since, however, an isolated state no longer exists, and is found only in the annals of the heathen world . . . we must always view the *society* of states as the essential condition of the modern world. . . . The great axioms of political science proceed from the knowledge of the true political interests of *all states*; it is upon these general interests that rests the guarantee of their existence. . . . What characterizes the modern world and distinguishes it from the ancient is the tendency of states to draw near each other and to form a kind of social body based on the same principle as human society. . . . In the ancient world isolation and the practice of the most absolute selfishness without other restraint than that of prudence was the sum of politics. . . . Modern society on the other hand exhibits the application of the principle of solidarity and of the balance of power between states. . . . The establishing of international relations, on the basis of reciprocity under the guarantee of respect for acquired rights, . . . constitutes in our time the essence of politics.<sup>6</sup>

The same concern for the state system was mirrored in the first secret article of the treaty of April 11, 1805, between Russia and Great Britain, which spoke of “the establishment in Europe of a federative system to ensure the independence of the weaker states by erecting a formidable barrier against the ambition of the more powerful.”<sup>7</sup> Gentz also had it in mind when he wrote:

The fate of Europe depends upon the fortunes and political relations of the powers which preponderate in the general system. If the balance be preserved among these; if their political existence and *international organization* be safely established; if, by their mutual action and reaction, they protect and secure the independence of the smaller states . . . ; if there is no dangerous preponderance to be perceived, which threatens to oppress the rest, or to involve them in endless war; [then] we may rest satisfied with the *federal constitution* which fulfills these most essential points, notwithstanding many errors and defects. And such was the federal constitution of Europe before the French revolution.<sup>8</sup>

This quotation fairly radiates concern for the *group* of states comprised in the state system.

These selections indicate the structure built by the supporters of balance-of-power policy. It will be observed, however, that their reasoning was not derived by a strict logic but had a certain admixture of faith, the cement between the first two blocks being two parts logic and one part faith, in spite of what the masons might protest to the contrary. Where a writer found balance of power to be an obvious maxim of self-interest, a careful scrutiny of his statement will reveal it to be merely a plausible half-truth. There are, to be sure, circumstances in which equilibrist policies would be obvious self-interest, especially those times when the balance of power was in danger of being upset to the disadvantage of the state. There are, however, numerous occasions when a violation of the principles of the balance of power would undeniably be self-interest: for example, when an opportunity for safe conquest and annexation appeared. Under such circumstances, balance-of-power theory demanded restraint, abnegation, and the denial of immediate self-interest.

## No one state shall preponderate

Once the second block was in place, there was no choice about the third. If one granted that the survival of independent states was the primary aim and added that the best chance of achieving it resided in preserving the state system, a relentless logic led to the obvious axiom of preventing the preponderance of any one member of the state system. "Nations [should] unite, or . . . prepare for their defense, as soon as they perceive anyone becoming dangerously powerful."<sup>9</sup> Failure to do so was "an inexcusable breach of duty."<sup>10</sup> Similar formulations have often been made by writers, typical of whom again was Friedrich Gentz in his assertion "That if the states system of Europe is to exist and be maintained by common exertions, no one of its members must ever become so powerful as to be able to coerce all the rest put together."<sup>11</sup>

There has never been any divergence of opinion among equilibrist writers on this third general proposition. Their statements vary a bit in phraseology and tone, but they convey the same substance. The position is well stated by Gaspard de Réal de Curban, writer on government in the middle of the eighteenth century:

For several centuries Europe has been worrying about the smallest manifestation of ambition which it perceived in a Power. Each nation, while it tries to rise above the others, is occupied with maintaining a certain balance, which bestows upon the smallest states the force of a large section of Europe, and preserves them in spite of the weakness of their armies and the defects of their governments. This equilibrium of power is based on the incontestable principle that the greatness of one Prince is, properly speaking, only the ruin or the diminution of the greatness of his neighbor, and that his might is but another's weakness.<sup>12</sup>

## Comments

### *Peace*

We may say that survival, a degree of co-operation, and the prevention of a hostile predominance were all germane to the balance-of-power theory, as indicated. We may also say that peace was not germane. However desirable it may have been, however passionately the theorist may have longed for it, however devotedly he may have consecrated his life to its realization, peace was no more essential to equilibrist theory than the barnacle to the boat . . .

We would be correct in listing peace as one of the incidental by-products of equilibrist policy, or as one of its secondary aims. There is no doubt that peace has often been temporarily preserved as a result of balance strategy; but we may also be sure that a system of independent, armed, and often mutually hostile states is inherently incapable of remaining at peace over a considerable period of time merely by the manipulation of balance techniques.

### *Status quo*

Returning to the assertion that a balance of power system "aims primarily to preserve peace and the *status quo*," we must still examine the *status quo* as an admissible, primary aim of balancing theory. In this case we may not say that one finds merely a casual connection between the two, as in the case of "peace" and the balance of power. We are not dealing with

a barnacle on the hull of the theory; rather, the design of the ship itself is at stake, for here we find separate groups of writers arguing separate interpretations of the relationship between balance of power and *status quo*. Some assert and some deny the need to preserve the *status quo* . . .

In support of the *status quo* as the proper interpretation of the primary aim of balance-of-power theory, one may argue both from the theoretical position and from the historical record. In theory, if the *status quo* of the Europe of 1648 or 1713, when Europe was dissected into many states, could have been preserved indefinitely, it would have assured forever that there could be no preponderant power. Neither France nor Austria, both of them prominent at those dates, was sufficiently powerful to dominate the continent. Moreover, England, Prussia, Spain, Sweden, and others were not negligible in the equilibrium. A freezing of such a divided Europe for all time would have meant the perpetuation of a state system and the avoidance of preponderance. Under those circumstances, "the survival of independent states" (meaning all states) would have involved the fighting of wars to maintain or restore the territorial framework which existed before the war. . . . [F]urthermore, the historical record has some encouraging words to add. For example, in the period from 1648 to 1792, there were, generally speaking, no great territorial changes in continental Europe, except for the first partition of Poland. . . . The record is, indeed, a remarkable one for preservation of the *status quo*. Wars, an all-too-familiar disfigurement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, repeatedly ended in restoration of either the *status quo* or a close approximation of it. . . . The apogee of the theory of balance of power, or at least an important part of it, was indeed contemporary to a notable retention of the general outlines of the *status quo* in Europe over a period of many years. So much may be accepted. There remain, however, powerful arguments against acceptance of the *status quo* interpretation as the only legitimate one.

The second interpretation, that is, the one which rejects slavish attention to the *status quo*, focuses attention on the unavoidable movement of history (as opposed to the possible freezing of a state system into a given *status quo*) and tends to emphasize the preservation of key members of the system at the expense, if necessary, of smaller or weaker powers. According to this point of view, one must take into account the dynamism of history, the flow of power and wealth from one area to another, the decadence of once-great powers in the general equilibrium, and the emergence of new, dynamic powers. The Greeks had a word for it—flux. Indeed, one of the great justifications of studying history is the insights which one gets into the process covered by this word. One of the few things that we can be sure of in all history is that everything changes. In the long run, flux will upset the best-laid plans of an earlier epoch. What once balanced nicely will for another generation hang as awkwardly as a wet toga. There is, then, a theoretical justification, and a strong one, for the reading of the phrase "survival of independent states" as some states, or key states, and not all states. With regard to the historical record, this school of thought can point an accusing finger at the opposition for its selection of 1792 as a terminal date for evidence. The use of evidence chosen only from the period before 1792 is arbitrary in the extreme, because such selectivity avoids the necessity of dealing with the awkward facts of 1793–1814, when Europe went through the most violent phase of the French Revolution, as well as two partitions of Poland, the excesses of Napoleonic imperialism, the violence of coalition warfare, a great modern broadening of warfare itself, the consolidation of German states, and the creation (coupled with the later destruction) of a great continental empire under Napoleon . . .

One may show that, although both had their weaknesses, the flux doctrine was better adapted to the harsh realities of history than the *status quo* position, particularly in the era of pronounced and fundamental changes from 1792 on. The supporters of the *status quo*

represented a kind of idealistic conservatism, at once more artificial, more legalistic, and more anachronistic than its tougher cousin. The theorists who rejected the *status quo* in favor of a more fluid equilibrium represented a point of view which was more tenable as a long-term adjustment to the flow of history, tougher and more workable in the harsh world of statecraft by diplomacy. The former was more a short-term policy and a typical small-power attitude; the latter, a safer long-term one and more an expression of a big-power point of view . . .

## Notes

- 1 See below . . . for comment on these points.
- 2 Brougham, *Works*, VIII, 80.
- 3 A.H.L. Heeren, *History of the Political System of Europe and Its Colonies* (Northampton, Mass., 1829), I, 12–13.
- 4 Vattel, *Law of Nations*, III, 13, no. 14.
- 5 Cited by T. J. Lawrence, *Principles of International Law* (Boston, 1910), 130. Text may be found in George K. Rickards (ed.), *The Statutes of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland* (London, 1804–69), XXVIII, pt. 1, 34.
- 6 Prince Metternich, *Mémoires, documents et écrits divers* (Paris, 1880–84), I, 30; cited by H. du Coudray, *Metternich* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936), 167–168.
- 7 French text in J. Holland Rose (ed.), *Select Despatches . . . relating to the Third Coalition against France, 1804–05* (London, 1904), App., 273; quoted by W. Alison Phillips, *The Confederation of Europe* (2d ed., New York, 1920), 40–41.
- 8 Friedrich von Gentz, *The State of Europe before and after the French Revolution* (pamphlet, London, 1801; trans. from *Von dem politischen Zustand von Europa vor und nach der französischen Revolution*, Berlin, 1801), 93; quoted by Von Laue, “History of the Balance of Power,” 93.
- 9 Brougham, *Works*, VIII, 73.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 72.
- 11 Gentz, *Fragments*, 61–62.
- 12 *La science du gouvernement* (Paris, 1765), VI, 442; hereafter cited as Réal, *Science du gouvernement*. Quoted in Von Laue, “History of the Balance of Power,” 37–38. See also *Appendix to the Memoirs of the Duke de Ripperda*, 357–358. Another eighteenth-century writer defined the balance of power as “the expressed or tacit union of several states of lesser power in order to secure their existence, their freedom and their possessions, and to prevent . . . the . . . too far-reaching designs of any other power which . . . has already become too overwhelming” (Ewald Friedrich, Graf von Hertzberg, *Über den wahren Reichtum des Staaten, das Gleichgewicht des Handels und der Macht* [Berlin, 1786], 9). Hertzberg (1725–1795) was a prominent Prussian statesman, chief minister to the king from 1763 to 1791, and author of many works on history and political science.

# Feedback

*Robert Jervis*

From: *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), Chapter 4.

## Balance of power

Balance of power is the best known, and perhaps the best, theory in international politics, although there is no agreement as to exactly what the theory holds, let alone whether it is valid.<sup>1</sup> What is crucial here is that the theory—or one variant of it known as the “automatic” model—illustrates general principles of systems dynamics, especially negative feedback.

Once we make a few simple and undemanding assumptions, the balance of power explains a number of outcomes that, while familiar, cannot otherwise be readily explained: No state has come to dominate the international system; few wars are total; losers rarely are divided up at the end of the war and indeed are reintegrated into the international system; small states, which do not have the resources to protect themselves, usually survive. There is then a deep form of stability in international politics. Although the fates of individual units rise and fall, states and much of the pattern of their interaction remain. The system is never transformed from an anarchical into a hierarchical one.

These patterns will follow if four assumptions hold. First, there must be several independent units. Second, the units must want to survive. They can seek to expand and indeed many usually will, but at minimum they must want to maintain their independence. Third, any unit must be willing to ally with any other on the basis of calculations of interest, which means that ideology and hatreds must not be so strong that they prevent actors from working together when strategic calculations indicate that they should. Fourth, war must be a viable tool of statecraft. This does not mean that states must be anxious to fight, but only that they are willing to do so.<sup>2</sup> Under these conditions, the system will be preserved even as states press every advantage, pay no attention to the common good, adopt ruthless tactics, and expect others to behave the same way. Put differently, states do not strive for balance; the restraints are not internal in the sense of each state's believing that it should be restrained. Rather, restraint and stability arise as ambition checks ambition and self-interest counteracts self-interest.

The basic argument is well known, if contested. For any state to survive, none of the others must be permitted to amass so much power that they can dominate.<sup>3</sup> Although states do not invariably join the weaker side,<sup>4</sup> they must balance against any actor that becomes excessively menacing if they are to safeguard their own independence and security. In a way analogous to the operation of Adam Smith's invisible hand, the maintenance of the system is an unintended consequence of states seeking to advance themselves, not the product of their desire to protect the international community or a preference for balance.<sup>5</sup>

This is not to say that forming a coalition to block a hegemon is easy: By the time statesmen



are sure that a state is gaining dominance, defeating it will be at least in part a collective good, which means that states are likely to minimize their own contributions, passing the buck to others if they can. Despite the use of private incentives like status, influence, and territory, coalition management is difficult and the alliances that defeated Napoleon, the kaiser, and Hitler experienced serious strain. Indeed, they might not have succeeded had the potential hegemon been more cautious.

Nevertheless, the theory passes one important test: No state has been able to dominate the international system. But this is not definitive: Few have tried—Napoleon, Hitler, perhaps the kaiser and Louis XIV. Although others may not have made the effort because they anticipated that they would be blocked, the small number of challenges must undermine our confidence that the system could have been maintained had there been more of them. Furthermore, although the overall balance of power system has never failed, local ones have. Not only have some countries come to dominate their regions (this can perhaps be accommodated within the theory), but isolated systems have fallen under the sway of one actor. While we consider it natural for China to be unified, in fact for centuries it consisted of independent states.<sup>6</sup> Rome's neighbors did not unite to check its power, and the British conquest of India also was made possible by the failure of a local balance.<sup>7</sup> But these cases were geographically limited and did not produce a world empire and put an end to international politics.

The other restraints and puzzles mentioned earlier—the fact that few wars become total and that losers and small states are not divided up—also follow from the dictates of self-interest within the constraints imposed by the anarchical system, although a bit less obviously. Since any state can ally with any other, states do not have permanent friends and enemies. Because today's adversary may be tomorrow's ally, crippling it would be foolish. Furthermore, while the state would gain territory and wealth from dividing up the loser, others might gain even more, thus putting the state at a disadvantage in subsequent conflicts. Of the Ottoman Empire, a Russian diplomat said: "If the cake could not be saved, it must be fairly divided."<sup>8</sup> It may be presumptuous to correct someone who presumably understood the balance of power very well, but I think he got it backwards: The cake had to be saved because it could *not* be divided evenly. The fear of being disadvantaged by an apportionment led states to keep the empire whole.

The knowledge that allies and enemies are not permanent and the expectation that losers will be treated relatively generously reinforce each other. Because the members of the winning coalition know that they are not likely to remain together after the war, each has to fear accretions to the power of its allies. Because winners know that they are not likely to be able to dismember the loser, why should they prolong the war? That each state knows its allies have reason to contemplate a separate peace provides it with further incentives to move quickly. The result, then, is a relatively moderate outcome not despite but because of the fear and greed of the individual states. This is one reason why international wars are much more likely to end in negotiated settlements than are civil wars.<sup>9</sup>

There is something wrong with this picture, however.<sup>10</sup> Wars against hegemonies can become total, losers sometimes are divided up, and postwar relations among states often are very different from those prevailing previously. The reason is that a long and bitter war against the hegemon undermines the assumptions necessary for the operation of the balance. States are likely to come to believe that wars are so destructive that they cannot be a normal instrument of statecraft and to see the hegemon as inherently evil and aggressive, which means that it is not a fit alliance partner and the winning coalition must stay together. As a result, allies are not regarded as being as much of a potential threat as balance of power

reasoning would lead us to expect. Postwar politics may then be unusually moderate and a concert system may evolve in which the states positively value the system, develop longer-run conceptions of their self-interests, and forgo competitive gains in the expectation that others will reciprocate. Ironically, then, a war against a would-be hegemon that epitomizes the operation of the balance of power is likely to produce a system in which the actors consciously moderate their behavior and restrain themselves. The negative feedback that acts in the balance of power is not complete; fighting a potential hegemon sets in motion forces that prevent the system from immediately returning to its original position.<sup>11</sup> Hitler was right to believe that balance of power logic would dictate the breakup of the coalition against him once success was in sight; his error was in failing to see that his behavior had altered balance thinking.

### *An alternative view—is it systemic?*

The model of the balance of power presented here is clearly systemic in that it sees a radical separation between intentions and outcomes, as Waltz has so clearly explained.<sup>12</sup> An alternative view of the balance of power that sees more congruence is summarized by Edward Gulick when he says that “balance-of-power theory demanded restraint, abnegation, and the denial of immediate self-interest.”<sup>13</sup> Morton Kaplan’s conception of the balance of power similarly posits internalized moderation as two of his six rules call for self-restraint: “Stop fighting rather than eliminate an essential national actor,” and “permit defeated or constrained essential national actors to reenter the system as acceptable role partners.”<sup>14</sup> For Kaplan, these rules not only describe how states behave, they consciously guide statesmen’s actions. Furthermore, these restraints are distinct from the rules that stress self-interest and the maximization of resources. In contrast to the automatic version discussed earlier, Kaplan points out that in his computer model, “if actors do not take system stability requirements into account, a ‘balance of power’ system will be stable only if some extra systemic factor . . . prevents a rollup of the system.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, stability and restraint are not likely unless the actors seek stability.<sup>16</sup> Statesmen sometimes agree: In 1908 the British foreign secretary rejected the suggestion of his ambassador in Vienna that Britain should seek to induce Austria-Hungary to desert the Triple Alliance, declaring this plan “fraught with considerable danger. The Balance of Power in Europe would be completely upset and Germany would be left without even her nominal allies . . . [and this] may precipitate a conflict.”<sup>17</sup>

This formulation is not systemic in the sense that I have used it because the restraints are purposeful rather than being an unintended consequence of the states’ struggles. The system is preserved because states want to preserve it and there is little conflict between a state’s short-run and long-run interest.<sup>18</sup> But seen differently, this conception of the balance is systemic in that the norms have been internalized through socialization as the actors watch and interact with their peers. Indeed, Paul Schroeder’s important study of the transformation of European international politics caused by the Napoleonic Wars stresses that stable peace and the concert were produced not only by the defeat of the aggressor, but also by the painful learning that led the victors to understand that others’ interests had to be respected, that smaller states could play a valuable role, and that the eighteenth-century practice of compensation and indemnities led to endless cycles of warfare.<sup>19</sup>

It can be further argued that stability requires that the states form a community, with the terms of membership including acceptance of norms of restraint which may be transnational ideas of the type alluded to by Bull and Hoffmann.<sup>20</sup> In this view, the balance of power

is a system in part because statesmen conceive of it as one, which does not have to be true in the automatic conception of the balance. Indeed, it is clear that statesmen often do think in systemic terms, not only in seeking to anticipate how others will respond to their moves, but also in seeing their countries as part of a larger whole.<sup>21</sup> But here the central question is whether or how feedbacks operate. To put this another way, it is not easy to explain how the system can be maintained in the face of actors who have interests in exploiting others' moderation.

Nevertheless, it is certainly possible that states feel internal restraints and that, if they do not, the system will be torn apart by high levels of warfare. If the proponents of the automatic balance draw on the analogy to Smith's invisible hand, critics can respond that unalloyed capitalism, like an engine out of control, will produce so much unconstrained energy that it will soon destroy itself. Just as economic liberalism must be embedded in broader societal norms if capitalism is to be compatible with a well-functioning society,<sup>22</sup> perhaps the pursuit of narrow self-interest in the balance of power can yield stability and a modicum of productive peace only if it is bounded by normative conceptions that limit predatory behavior.

### *Anticipation of the operation of balance of power*

States may be restrained by the expectation that if they are not, they will be faced by intense opposition. These cases fall in between the two models discussed above. Indeed, if the view of the balance as automatic is correct, it would be surprising if decision makers heedlessly sought to expand; awareness of the likely feedback would lead them to be restrained. Much has been written about self-defeating expansion,<sup>23</sup> but we should not neglect the fact that leaders may be inhibited by the anticipation of these processes. These cases are literally countless—that is, they cannot be counted because they do not leave traces in the historical record. While this means that we cannot always determine whether the anticipation of the balance of power explains a state's moderate policy, on some occasions statesmen do consider various moves only to reject them on the grounds that they would incite undue opposition. Thus during the Russo-Turkish war of 1828, many of the czar's advisors "recommended that Russia make peace as quickly as possible and henceforth observe a policy of restraint in the Near East. Any further Russian advance risked the danger of foreign intervention and war with one or more of the European great powers, or the participation of these powers in the partition of the Ottoman Empire with the result that Russia would have powerful and dangerous rivals along its frontiers instead of the hapless Turks."<sup>24</sup> Similarly, although the Soviet Union supported the Loyalist regime during the Spanish Civil War, "nothing was further from the Soviet government's intentions than a satellite Spain. The conquest of a backward nation would have been more than offset by the almost inevitable consequent hostility of France and Britain."<sup>25</sup>

In the same way, decision makers who believe in the action–reaction model of arms races are likely to be deterred from increasing their defense budgets by the expectation that their adversaries would do so as well, and when considering whether to send additional troops to Vietnam, American decision-makers thought a great deal about the likelihood of a matching North Vietnamese response, although in the end this consideration did not prevail. More generally, it is easier for actors to cooperate despite the security dilemma if they understand that others are likely to reciprocate their menacing moves. Thus many of those who opposed the extension of the American alliance system in the 1950s argued that for every ally the U.S. recruited, the Soviet Union would enlist the ally's regional rival; before Norway joined NATO, both it and the U.S. gave considerable thought to whether the Soviet Union would

respond by consolidating its hold on Finland; in 1873 Argentina hesitated before signing a treaty with Peru and Bolivia out of fear that the result would be a pact between Chile and Brazil.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, even though statesmen generally think very well of their own countries, the more perceptive of them realize that the balance of power makes it dangerous for their countries to be too powerful. Edmund Burke made the point eloquently at the end of the eighteenth century:

Among precautions against ambition, it may not be amiss to take one precaution against *our* own. I must fairly say, I dread our *own* power and our *own* ambition; I dread our being too much dreaded. It is ridiculous to say we are not men, and that, as men, we shall never wish to aggrandize ourselves in some way or other. Can we say that even at this hour we are not invidiously aggrandized? We are already in possession of almost all the commerce of the world. Our empire in India is an awful thing. If we should come to be in a condition not only to have all this ascendant in commerce, but to be absolutely able, without the least control, to hold the commerce of all other nations totally dependent upon our good pleasure, we may say that we shall not abuse this astonishing and hitherto unheard-of power. But every other nation will think we shall abuse it. It is impossible but that, sooner or later, this stage of things must produce a combination against us which may end in our ruin.<sup>27</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Still the best comprehensive treatment is Inis Claude, *Power and International Relations* (New York: Random House, 1962). The two views of the balance that I will discuss—one seeing restraint arising from interactions within the system and the other seeing a much greater role for self-restraint—correspond to Claude’s “automatic” and “manual” versions of the balance: *ibid.*, pp. 43–45. Most British writers endorse varieties of the “manual” version: See the special issue of the *Review of International Studies* 15 (April, 1989); Carsten Holbraad, *The Concert of Europe: A Study in German and British International Theory, 1815–1914* (London: Longman, 1970). Morgenthau starts his discussion of the balance of power by adopting the automatic model but then incorporates many elements of the manual model: Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 5th ed., revised (New York: Knopf, 1978), chapters 11–12. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1979), espouses the automatic version, a position that I adopt here. Because I am concerned here only with those aspects of the theory that deal with feedbacks, many issues about the balance will be put aside.
- 2 Waltz sees fewer conditions as necessary: “That [politics be] anarchic and that it be populated by units wishing to survive”: *ibid.*, p. 121. The importance of the ability of states to change alliances on the basis of short-run interest is stressed by George Liska, *Nations in Alliance* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962); A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics*, 2d ed. (New York: Knopf, 1968), pp. 290–92; Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, pp. 196–204; and Martin Wight, “The Balance of Power and International Order,” in Alan James, ed., *The Bases of International Order: Essays in Honour of C. A. W. Manning* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 104–5. For a further discussion of the conditions necessary for balancing, see Jack Levy, “The Causes of War: A Review of Theories and Evidence,” in Philip Tetlock et al., eds., *Behavior, Society, and Nuclear War*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 228–31.
- 3 Note that the theory does not address the question of what leads a state to try to become a hegemon. While it is possible that a system-level argument could be developed here, it seems hard to avoid looking at the nature of the state and its decision makers. It is not likely to be an accident that the main disturbers of the twentieth-century international system oppressed their domestic populations as well.
- 4 They often do: Thomas Cusack and Richard Stoll, “Balance Behavior in the International System, 1816–1976,” *International Interactions* 16, no. 4 (1991), pp. 255–70; Stephen Walt,

- The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987). In domestic politics, those who are losing often seek to redress the balance by mobilizing previously uninvolved actors: E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1960).
- 5 I think that Talcott Parsons is correct to note that we can group together Realists like Hobbes with Liberals like Locke and Smith because both groups see social order arising out of the interaction of individuals who are calculating on the basis of their self-interest as contrasted with theorists like Durkheim who stress the importance of internalized norms: Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1937).
  - 6 Richard Walker, *The Multi-State System of Ancient China* (Hamden, Conn.: Shoestring Press, 1953).
  - 7 Robert Errington, *The Dawn of Empire: Rome's Rise to World Power* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1972). The most obvious explanation for the latter case—the superiority of British military technology—is not correct: Stephen Peter Rosen, *Social Structures and Strategies: India and its Armies* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996).
  - 8 Quoted in Edward Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power* (New York: Norton, 1955), p. 72. For a discussion of relative and absolute gains in international politics, see David Baldwin, ed., *Neorealism and Neoliberalism in International Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). This balance of power logic explains why relative gains matter less in a multipolar system: When adversaries and allies cannot be identified, statesmen cannot tell whether the growth of another's power will help or threaten them. For a formal treatment, see Duncan Snidal, "Relative Gains and the Pattern of International Cooperation": *ibid.*, chapter 7.
  - 9 For the data, but different explanations, see Roy Licklider, ed., *Stopping the Killing: How Civil Wars End* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), and Barbara Walter, "The Resolution of Civil Wars: Why Negotiations Fail" (unpublished dissertation, Department of Political Science, University of Chicago, 1994).
  - 10 This discussion is drawn from Robert Jervis, "From Balance to Concert," *World Politics* 38 (October 1985), pp. 58–79, and Jervis, "Security Regimes," *International Organization* 36 (Spring 1982), pp. 362–68.
  - 11 The concert system is prone to decay back into balance of power: Jervis, "From Balance to Concert," pp. 61–62.
  - 12 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 107–11, 120–21.
  - 13 Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power*, p. 33; also see pp. 30–32, 304–6. Gulick's historical analysis is quite sound; although his statements are couched in the abstract, they come from a study of the Congress of Vienna, which was a concert system.
  - 14 Morton Kaplan, *System and Process in International Politics* (New York: Wiley, 1957), p. 23. Kaplan expresses a different view—one much closer to Waltz's—in "Balance of Power, Bipolarity and other Models of International Systems," *American Political Science Review* 51 (September 1957), p. 690.
  - 15 Morton Kaplan, *Towards Professionalism in International Theory* (New York: Free Press, 1979), p. 136; also see Kaplan, "A Poor Boy's Journey," in Joseph Kruzel and James Rosenau, eds., *Journeys Through World Politics* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1989), pp. 45–47.
  - 16 Kaplan, *Towards Professionalism*, pp. 39, 73, 86. Also see Kaplan, "The Hard Facts of International Theory," *Journal of International Affairs* 44 (Spring/Summer 1990), p. 19, and Organski, *World Politics*, chapter 12. Some computer simulations of the balance of power support this view: Arnold Reinken, "Computer Explorations of the 'Balance of Power,'" in Morton Kaplan, ed., *New Approaches to International Relations* (New York: St. Martin's, 1968), pp. 469–72; Stuart Bremmer and Michael Mihalka, "Machiavelli in Machina: Or Politics Among Hexagons," in Karl Deutsch et al., eds., *Problems of World Modeling: Political and Social Implications* (Cambridge: Ballinger, 1977), chapter 20; Thomas Cusack and Richard Stoll, *Exploring Realpolitik: Probing International Relations Theory With Computer Simulation* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1990). In the mathematical model developed by Emerson Niu and Peter Ordeshook ("Stability in Anarchic International Systems," *American Political Science Review* 84 [December 1990], pp. 1207–34), however, anarchy is compatible with stability. Also see Lars-Erik Cederman, "Emergent Polarity: Analyzing State-Formation and Power Politics," *International Studies Quarterly* 38 (December 1994), pp. 501–33.
  - 17 Quoted in F. R. Bridge, "Relations with Austria-Hungary and the Balkan States, 1905–1908," in F. H. Hinsley, ed., *British Foreign Policy Under Sir Edward Grey* (Cambridge: Cambridge



- University Press, 1977), p. 176. French statesmen in this period often reasoned similarly: see John Kreiger, *France and the Origins of the First World War* (London: Macmillan, 1983).
- 18 Kaplan, *Towards Professionalism*, p. 139; also see pp. 76, 135.
  - 19 Paul Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics, 1787–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). John Vasquez also stresses the role of images and learning in maintaining balance of power politics: *The War Puzzle* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 86–87 and chapter 5. For a discussion of the differences between Schroeder's views and more traditional Realist analysis, see Schroeder, "Did the Vienna Settlement Rest on a Balance of Power?" *American Historical Review* 97 (June 1992), pp. 683–706, and Jervis, "A Political Science Perspective on the Balance of Power and the Concert," *ibid.*, pp. 716–24.
  - 20 Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977); Stanley Hoffmann, "International Systems and International Law," in Klaus Knorr and Sidney Verba, eds., *The International System* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 207, 211–13. Morgenthau also stresses the importance of a moral consensus in producing a framework of restraints which makes a balance of power possible: Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, pp. 221–28.
  - 21 See Paul Schroeder, "The Transformation of Political Thinking, 1787–1848," in Jack Snyder and Robert Jervis, eds., *Coping with Complexity in the International System* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1993), pp. 47–70.
  - 22 The concept of embedded liberalism was developed by Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1944) and has been fruitfully applied by John Ruggie in "International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order," *International Organization* 36 (Spring 1982), pp. 379–415.
  - 23 See, for examples, Paul Kennedy, *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987); Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991); Charles Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994).
  - 24 Norman Rich, *Why the Crimean War?* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1985), p. 16.
  - 25 Adam Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence: The History of Soviet Foreign Policy, 1916–67* (New York: Praeger, 1968), p. 245. Soviet restraint toward Finland after World War II may have the same roots and understanding this, the U.S. also pursued moderate goals: See Jussi Hanhimäki, "'Containment' in a Borderland: The United States and Finland, 1948–49," *Diplomatic History* 18 (Summer 1994), pp. 353–74. Similarly, a state may refrain from defeating an adversary too completely for fear that if it does, it will have to face a stronger or more dangerous rival. For examples, see Melanie Billings-Yun, *Decision Against War: Eisenhower and Dien Bien Phu, 1954* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 11; Peter Lowe, *Great Britain and the Origins of the Pacific War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 63; and William Simons, "U.S. Coercive Pressure on North Vietnam, Early 1965," in Alexander George and William Simons, eds., *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy*, 2d ed. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1994), p. 141.
  - 26 U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1949*, vol. 4, *Western Europe* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975), pp. 65–68; Robert Burr, *By Reason or Force: Chile and the Balance of Power in South America, 1830–1905* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), p. 126. For a parallel discussion, see Glenn Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, forthcoming), chapter 2.
  - 27 Quoted in Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, pp. 169–70, emphasis in the original. Also see the similar analysis of François Fénelon cited in Kenneth Waltz, "America as a Model for the World? A Foreign Policy Perspective," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 24 (December 1991), p. 669, and Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," *International Security* 18 (Fall 1993), pp. 74–76, 79.



# Balancing on land and at sea

## Do states ally against the leading global power?

*Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson*

From: *International Security* 35, no. 1 (Summer 2010): 7–43.

### . . . Balance of power theory

The many meanings of the balance of power concept and the multiple and often contradictory variations of the theory often preclude a rigorous and systematic empirical test.<sup>1</sup> Most alliance behavior or military buildups can be interpreted as some state balancing against some kind of power or some kind of threat by some other state. Unless one specifies who balances against whom, in response to what levels of concentration of what kinds of power or what kinds of threats in what kinds of systems, it is impossible to construct an empirical test of balancing propositions.<sup>2</sup>

Despite their many disagreements, nearly all balance of power theorists would accept the following set of interrelated propositions: (1) the prevention of others from achieving a position of hegemony in the system is a primary security goal of states; (2) threats of hegemony generate great-power balancing coalitions; and (3) as a result, sustained hegemonies rarely if ever form in multistate systems.<sup>3</sup> This consensus among balance of power theorists concerns counterhegemonic balancing by great powers, and that is our focus here. Balance of power theorists do not all agree that great powers balance against the strongest power in the system, irrespective of the magnitude of its advantage,<sup>4</sup> and they do not agree about the balancing behavior of weaker states in great power systems.<sup>5</sup>

Although these balance of power propositions about national-level preferences and strategies and about system-level outcomes appear to be uncontroversial, they are underspecified because they fail to identify the system over which hegemony might be established and the basis of power in that system. The balance of power literature generally neglects these distinctions, advances an undifferentiated conception of the great powers, and implies that balance of power propositions are universally valid in any historical system. We reject these arguments and contend that balance of power theories—like nearly all social science theories—are bound by certain scope conditions.

It is critical to distinguish between autonomous continental systems, where land-based military power is dominant, and transregional maritime systems, where naval strength and economic wealth are dominant. We give particular attention to the European continental system and the global maritime system, and we argue that power dynamics are different in these two systems. This distinction was implicitly recognized in the most influential balance of power literature in Western international theory developed during the last three centuries, which focuses almost exclusively on Europe, reflects its geostrategic context, and refers to balancing by European great powers against hegemonic threats to the European continent by land-based military powers.<sup>6</sup> Hypotheses on balances and balancing can be applied outside

of Europe, but scholars must be sensitive to whether the key assumptions underlying balance of power theory are applicable in other systems.<sup>7</sup>

British theorists, later reinforced by Americans (who had a Eurocentric security outlook until the late twentieth century), have had a particularly significant impact on the development of balance of power theory. They have reflected the traditional definition of British interests in terms of a balance of power on the European continent, not a balance of power in the global system, which Britain preferred to dominate based on its commercial, financial, and naval power.<sup>8</sup>

The implicit Eurocentric bias in balance of power theory is closely related to the theory's focus on land-based military power as the primary basis of power in the system.<sup>9</sup> The concentrations of power that are implicitly assumed to be the most feared, and that are hypothesized to precipitate balancing behavior, are those that most directly and immediately threaten the territorial integrity of other states. States with large armies that can invade and occupy have traditionally been perceived as far greater threats than states that have large navies and economic empires.

It is hardly a coincidence that when balance of power theorists talk about balancing against hegemonic threats, the historical examples to which they usually refer are European coalitions against the land-based military power of the Habsburgs under Charles V in the early sixteenth century, Philip II at the end of the sixteenth century, and the combined strength of Spain and Austria in the Thirty Years' War; against France under Louis XIV and then Napoleon; and against Germany under Wilhelm II and then Hitler.<sup>10</sup> There is little mention of balancing against leading global powers such as the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, Britain in the nineteenth century, or the United States in the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> Even recent critics of balance of power theory focus almost exclusively on the European system . . .<sup>12</sup>

### ***Land powers and sea powers***

Our basic argument is that alliance behavior and other forms of strategic interaction are different in the global system than in continental systems. States' highest priorities are to provide for their territorial and constitutional integrity. The greatest threats to those interests come from large armies that can cross territorial frontiers, seize and occupy territory, take or destroy resources, depose political leaders, and impose new political structures and social systems. Dominant continental powers devote their resources to building armies that facilitate the defense of their frontiers and the expansion of regional territorial empires. They pose threats to other great powers as well as to less powerful states, and other great powers often respond by forming defensive alliances, building up their own military capabilities, or both.

Maritime powers have smaller armies, fewer capabilities for invading and occupying, and fewer incentives to do so. They pose significantly weaker threats to the territorial integrity of other states, particularly to other great powers, but greater threats to each other than to leading land-based powers. All of this reduces the incentives of land-based powers to balance against the leading global maritime power, even if the maritime leader is considerably stronger than all the rest. Thus, in 1915 Norman Angell addressed the issue of "why the world does not fear British 'marinism' and does fear German militarism" by arguing that "'marinism' does not encroach on social and political freedom and militarism does."<sup>13</sup>

Maritime power is not based on navies alone, but also, as Alfred Thayer Mahan recognized, on economic strength, and the leading sea power is usually the leading economic power in

the global system.<sup>14</sup> This is as true of the United States today as it was of Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the Netherlands in the seventeenth century. Indeed, the principal reason maritime powers develop their navies is to protect and expand trade, just as the principal reason land powers develop their armies is to protect and possibly expand territory. Leading sea powers also create international regimes to protect their positions of economic and naval dominance. They have evolved into leading air and space powers since the twentieth century, thereby technologically updating the means by which they control “the commons” so critical to predominance in the global system.<sup>15</sup>

Thus the distinction is not just between land-based military power and sea-based naval power and the different threats imposed by armies and navies, but even more important, the larger distinction between the threats posed by territorial hegemony over land and people and by economic hegemony over markets. Economic dominance does not necessarily require political control, certainly not over other great powers, as Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher recognized in their concept of the “imperialism of free trade.”<sup>16</sup> Political leaders and their peoples may resent both the lack of fair access to distant resources and markets and poor terms of trade, but these resentments pale in comparison to the threat of physical invasion and imperial dominance posed by land-based hegemons.

Unlike land-based empires, dominance in markets and on the seas does not generally involve infringements on the territorial sovereignty of other leading powers in more developed areas, and sea powers have historically shown little interest in getting involved in territorial disputes on the continent. The classic illustration is Britain. As balance of power theorists have long recognized, Britain’s primary interests lay in expanding its markets and investment opportunities overseas.<sup>17</sup> Its primary interests on the European continent lay not in increasing its power and influence, but only in preventing any single state or combination of states from gaining control of a disproportionate amount of the resources on the continent, which could then provide a basis for challenging Britain’s maritime dominance. This is the classic role of the offshore balancer, which many attribute to the United States with respect to both Europe and Asia in the contemporary system.<sup>18</sup>

Given these differences between the perceived threats associated with naval and economic dominance, on the one hand, and regional territorial hegemony, on the other, we expect high concentrations of land-based military power to generate counterbalancing coalitions of other regional great powers, but we do not expect high concentrations of sea power to have a comparable effect in generating counterbalancing coalitions against the leading global power. In fact, given the public goods often provided by leading economic states,<sup>19</sup> we argue that high concentrations of sea power are likely to be associated with a lower likelihood of balancing by continental great powers, and that great powers are more likely to ally with predominant sea powers than to ally against them. Great powers ally with predominant sea powers to secure military or diplomatic support against threats posed by the dominant land power or another traditional rival, gain economic benefits by associating with the leading economic power and the global system it has helped create, or reap a share of the spoils from being on the winning side of an anticipated war.

The stronger the leading sea power is, the more likely it is interested primarily in extending control over markets, as opposed to territory, especially in regions with other great powers. The economic costs of a strategy of territorial expansion are too great, and the leading sea power will usually find itself at a comparative disadvantage in attempts to project its maritime influence inland against significant land power resistance. States with mixed goals of regional territorial control and political-economic control of distant markets tend to wobble in their attempts to achieve multiple goals. They may build strong armies and navies,

as did Philip II or Louis XIV, but there are limits to the ability to achieve supremacy in both spheres. The only states that have been likely to build and then maintain the largest navies are those such as Britain, which are somewhat removed from land-based threats and which are consequently free to choose to avoid the extension of nearby territorial control. Leading sea powers are likely to become concerned with territorial control—over weaker peoples outside of Europe, not over other European great powers—only as their economic influence wanes and as they fall back on more coercive strategies in an attempt to maintain their naval bases and competitive positions.<sup>20</sup>

Strong land powers confront more difficulties in developing coercive resources for deployment at sea. Late-sixteenth-century Spain had little in the way of a blue-water navy prior to its seizure (on land) of Portugal's navy in the early 1580s. Repeated defeats of Spanish armadas against England then contributed greatly to the destruction of Spain's newly acquired naval power. Late-seventeenth-century France built the leading naval fleet in the 1670s–80s but was no longer competitive at sea by the late 1690s, thanks to redoubled efforts on the part of the English and the Dutch. Even prior to the onset of war in 1914, Germany conceded defeat to the British in the naval arms race and gave primacy to the arms race on land. Germany initiated World War II years before its planned naval preparations might have given it some possibility of competing at sea. The Soviet Union's own ambivalence about sea power is well manifested in its intermittent attempts to build competitive aircraft carriers between the 1930s and 1980s.

### ***Hypotheses on great-power alliance behavior***

... Below we summarize our hypotheses about alliance behavior in the global maritime system, with some comparisons with behavior in the European system. The first hypothesis reflects our core theoretical argument.

*H1:* Great powers generally do not balance against the most powerful sea power in the system, even if it is significantly increasing in strength.

Hypothesis 1 (H1) refers to both the level of power concentration in the global system and to the rate of change in power. Its predictions are diametrically opposed to those of balance of power theory on both counts. Thus a strong implication of H1 is that great powers are less likely to balance against leading sea powers than against leading land powers at comparable levels of dominance in the system.

Whereas the probability of balancing against the leading European power increases monotonically with that state's relative power or margin of advantage in the system (at least up to the point of hegemony), so that counterhegemonic balancing is likely in that system, we have different expectations for alliance behavior in the global maritime system. We predict that the probability of balancing against the leading sea power decreases as that state controls a greater proportion of the resources in the system. First, great powers perceive fewer threats from leading sea powers than from leading land powers. Second, because the leading sea power tends to be the strongest when it is the leading economic power, other great powers generally anticipate potential benefits from associating with a predominant economic and naval power and with the global political-economic order that it created and helps to maintain. This tendency significantly reduces their incentives for balancing. The causal impact of this public goods logic is greatest when the leading sea power plays a leading role in the world economy.<sup>21</sup> Third, because the economic requirements for naval

power are greater than those for land-based military power, fewer states are able to compete with leading sea powers than with leading land powers, particularly when the leading power is increasing in strength.<sup>22</sup> These considerations lead to hypothesis 2.

*H2:* The stronger the leading sea power's relative capability position, the less likely it is that other great powers will balance against it.

If great powers are less likely to balance against dominant sea powers than against dominant land powers, we should expect that broad alliance coalitions (consisting of multiple members) should be less likely to form against leading sea powers than against leading land powers. This stands in contrast to balance of power theory, which suggests that hegemonic threats deriving from high concentrations of power should generate not only a counterbalancing coalition, but a coalition involving several great powers rather than just two. Multilateral coalitions are particularly significant for balance of power theory, because they facilitate the inference that alliances are driven by considerations of balancing for the collective good of avoiding hegemony as opposed to more limited parochial goals such as gaining support against a particular rival. We have no such expectations, however, for the global maritime system. In addition, given the greater resources required to build strong navies as compared to strong armies, we expect that the stronger the leading sea power, the fewer the number of states that have the economic ability to compete with it. This expectation leads to our third hypothesis.

*H3:* The stronger the leading sea power's relative capability position, the less likely that large coalitions will form against it.

The logic underlying hypotheses H2 and H3 suggests not only that great powers (and other states) have fewer incentives to ally against the leading sea power, but also that they may have strong incentives to ally with it. The majority of great powers benefit from the trading regime set up by the leading global sea power, and they have an incentive to maintain that system. In addition, they recognize that the expansion of a leading land power poses a potential threat to their own territorial integrity and to the stability of the existing economic regime from which they benefit, and they have incentives to secure support against that threat from the leading sea power.<sup>23</sup>

It takes two to tango, of course, and the leading sea power also has incentives to find regional allies. It bears much of the financial and coordination burden in organizing coalitions to suppress serious challenges to the existing political economy and to its own dominant position by ascending land powers in continental systems, the European system in particular. Given their specialization in naval resources, sea powers find it difficult to fight land powers, and they have strong incentives to acquire alliance partners with strong land-power resources when they perceive threats from ascending land powers. Allies capable of keeping a European challenger fighting on multiple fronts are especially attractive.

Land powers also encounter problems fighting sea powers, but they find it more difficult to acquire the type of allies they need to contend with global sea powers and with other regional land powers. The expansionist threat posed by their large armies makes more enemies than friends among adjacent powers. Naval powers tend to favor the maintenance of the global status quo as long as it is biased in their favor, and thus tend to prefer aligning with the leading sea power than with land powers. As a consequence, European land-expansionist powers have often found themselves fighting with the support of relatively

weak allies (e.g., Germany with allies Austria-Hungary in World War I and with Italy in World War II, and eighteenth-century France with Spain). This logic leads to our next two hypotheses.

*H4:* The stronger the leading sea power's relative capability position, the more likely it is that one or more great powers will ally with it.

*H5:* Alliances with the leading sea power tend to be broader than are alliances against the leading sea power.

These two hypotheses about great power alliances with the leading naval power, in conjunction with the finding that great power alliances with the leading land power are relatively rare in the European system, imply that great powers are more likely to ally with the dominant sea power than with the dominant land power at a comparable level of dominance, and that great power coalitions with the leading sea power tend to be broader than coalitions with the leading land power . . .

## Conclusion

The many diverse and sometimes contradictory variations of balance of power theory share the two core propositions that great powers balance against the strongest state in the system and that, as a result, sustained hegemonies never form in multistate systems. These propositions, if formulated as a universal theory, are almost certainly incorrect. Hegemonies frequently emerged in ancient systems and in more recent non-Western systems, sometimes because of the absence of balancing. High concentrations of power also formed in the global maritime system under Britain in the nineteenth century and under the United States in the twentieth century.<sup>24</sup> If we abandon universalist aims and conceive of balance of power theory as subject to certain scope conditions, however, the theory may have considerable explanatory power in well-defined empirical domains.

Any system-level theory needs to specify the system under consideration, the basis of power in that system, and its key actors. A properly specified balance of power theory needs to recognize the distinction between great powers and other powers, between regional continental systems and the global maritime system, and between counterhegemonic balancing and balancing against other threats. We argue that great powers have a strong tendency to balance against hegemonic threats deriving from high concentrations of land-based military power, especially in Europe. Great powers have a weaker tendency to balance against leading powers with a more modest advantage in land-based military power, and they only occasionally balance against high concentrations of economic and naval power in the global maritime system. We make no predictions about the behavior of smaller powers in great power systems.

Continental systems and the maritime system differ in terms of the basis of power in the system, the goals and interests and strategies of the leading powers, and consequently in their power dynamics. Leading continental land powers live by territory and develop armies to protect and expand that territory. Leading sea powers live by trade and the economic empires supported by trade, and they develop navies to protect and expand their trading systems. Large armies pose greater threats to the territorial and constitutional integrity of other leading states than do large navies. This leads us to hypothesize that high concentrations of land-based military power induce other great powers to form counterbalancing alliances



to protect their security, deter future expansion by the dominant state, and, if deterrence fails, defeat that state in war, whereas high concentrations of sea power do not provoke such coalitions . . .

## Notes

- 1 Ernst B. Haas, "The Balance of Power: Prescription, Concept, or Propaganda?" *World Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (July 1953), pp. 442–477; and Inis L. Claude Jr., *Power and International Relations* (New York: Random House, 1962).
- 2 Jack S. Levy, "Balances and Balancing: Concepts, Propositions, and Research Design," in John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman, eds., *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2003), pp. 128–153.
- 3 Ibid.; and Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, "Hegemonic Threats and Great-Power Balancing in Europe, 1495–1999," *Security Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (January–March 2005), pp. 1–33. Here we define balance of power theory broadly to include both balance of power theory per se and balance of threat theory. These two theories converge on the counterhegemonic balancing proposition, because if a state is strong enough to threaten hegemony, it will usually constitute a significant threat to the interests of all other great powers.
- 4 R. Harrison Wagner, "Peace, War, and the Balance of Power," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 3 (September 1994), pp. 593–607.
- 5 The great power orientation of traditional balance of power theory is widely recognized by diplomatic historians and political scientists. Leopold von Ranke, "The Great Powers," in von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, ed. Georg G. Iggers and Konrad von Moltke (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, [1833] 1973), pp. 65–101; A.J.P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848–1918* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954); Inis L. Claude Jr., "The Balance of Power Revisited," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (April 1989), pp. 77–85 at p. 78; and Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979), pp. 72–73.
- 6 On the historical development of balance of power theory beginning in the late fifteenth century Italian city-state system and progressing through David Hume, Emerich de Vattel, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, see Moorhead Wright, ed., *Theory and Practice of the Balance of Power, 1486–1914: Selected European Writings* (London: Dent, 1975); Michael Sheehan, *The Balance of Power: History and Theory* (London: Routledge, 1996); and Richard Little, *The Balance of Power in International Relations: Metaphors, Myths, and Models* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007). More recent work includes Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: the Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948); Edward Vose Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1955); and Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: The Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977). By arguing that global hegemony is out of reach, that states strive for regional hegemony where land power is dominant, and that global powers often act as offshore balancers, John J. Mearsheimer (*The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* [New York: W. W. Norton, 2001]) is an important exception to the universalizing tendency of most balance of power theorists.
- 7 Key assumptions are that the system is anarchic, autonomous, and not significantly influenced by powers outside the system. These assumptions are not problematic for Europe, but they can be problematic for other regional systems. Recent attempts to apply balance of power theories to regional systems include Stephen M. Watt, *Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987); and T.V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann, eds., *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004).
- 8 For a plea for more attention to the rhetorical uses of the balance of power concept, see Daniel H. Nexon, "The Balance of Power in the Balance," *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (April 2009), pp. 330–359 at p. 355.
- 9 By "Eurocentric bias," we mean a preoccupation not only with European powers but also with their behavior and outcomes on the European continent. Leading European states have also played a central role in the global system for the last five centuries, and any global perspective on the great powers would have to emphasize the European powers. See Jeremy Black, *Great Powers and the Quest for Hegemony: The World Order since 1500* (London: New York: Routledge, 2007).

- 10 Quincy Wright, *A Study of War*, 2d rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 750; Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe*, p. xix; Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987), chap. 2; and Kenneth N. Waltz, "Evaluating Theories," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (December 1997), pp. 913–917 at p. 914. Kennedy and Waltz include the Habsburgs under Charles V in their respective lists of hegemonic threats, whereas Wright and Taylor exclude them. We agree with Kennedy and Waltz. Our data show that by 1550 the Habsburgs controlled 53 percent of great power military capabilities in Europe.
- 11 Morgenthau was not puzzled by either British dominance or the absence of balancing against it in the nineteenth century, and he would not have been puzzled by the absence of balancing against the United States after the end of the Cold War. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*.
- 12 Paul Schroeder, "Historical Reality vs. Neo-realist Theory," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Summer 1994), pp. 108–148; Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Summer 1994), pp. 72–107; Richard Rosecrance and Chih-Cheng Lo, "Balancing, Stability, and War: The Mysterious Case of the Napoleonic International System," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (December 1996), pp. 479–500; and John A. Vasquez, "The Realist Paradigm and Degenerative versus Progressive Research Programs: An Appraisal of Neotraditional Research on Waltz's Balancing Proposition," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (December 1997), pp. 899–912.
- 13 Norman Angell, *The World's Highway: Some Notes on America's Relation to Sea Power and Non-Military Sanctions for the Law of Nations* (New York: George H. Doran, 1915), p. 2.
- 14 Captain A.T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* (New York: Dover, [1890] 1987).
- 15 This shift in the nature of capabilities does not detract from the need to distinguish global from regional systems, or to distinguish between powers that emphasize land and non-land capabilities (which we denote as maritime for convenience hereafter). For a comparison of major-power naval capability shares with shares of strategic bombers, intercontinental ballistic missiles, and military satellites since World War I, see Michael Lee and William R. Thompson, "Measuring Command of the Commons and Global Capability Reach," Indiana University, 2010.
- 16 Ronald E. Robinson and John A. Gallagher with Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism*, 2d ed. (London: Macmillan, 1981).
- 17 Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*; and Ludwig Dehio, *The Precarious Balance: Four Centuries of the European Power Struggle* (New York: Random House, 1962).
- 18 Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*; and Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006).
- 19 This is emphasized by hegemonic stability theory. Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).
- 20 William R. Thompson and Gary Zuk, "World Power and the Strategic Trap of Territorial Commitments," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (September 1986), pp. 249–267.
- 21 Historically, this implies that this argument is more applicable to periods of British and U.S. predominance in the last three centuries than to earlier centuries, where the leading sea power (Portugal, England, Spain, the Netherlands, and France) had a less dominant position in the global economy.
- 22 A secondary factor that might affect decisions on balancing is that engagements at sea are more decisive and therefore riskier than are engagements on land. Battles at sea involve a higher proportion of a state's war-making capabilities than do battles on land, and because navies are more capital intensive than armies, it takes longer to rebuild after a major defeat at sea than on land. Winston S. Churchill, explaining the absence of a major fleet confrontation in World War I, noted that Jellicoe (commander of the Grand Fleet at the beginning the war) was "the only man on either side who could lose the war in an afternoon." Churchill, *The World Crisis*, Vol. 3: 1916–1918, Pt. 1 (New York: Scribner's, 1927), p. 106.
- 23 This is illustrated by the balancing coalitions against the Habsburgs, France under Louis XIV and then Napoleon, and Germany under Wilhelm II and then the Nazis.
- 24 On ancient and non-Western systems, see Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society: A Comparative Historical Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1992); Victoria Tin-Bar Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Stuart J. Kaufman, Richard Little, and William C. Wohlforth, eds., *The Balance of Power in World History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

## 4 Neorealism

Realism's influence waned in the 1960s and 1970s, but returned to a position of prominence in the international relations subfield following the publication of Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* in 1979. The volume, which outlines Waltz's theory of neorealism (the term "neorealism" was coined by one of his critics, Richard Ashley), is widely considered to be the most influential realist text. It is rivaled only by Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations* for the depth and duration of its impact. In contrast to Morgenthau's human-nature classical realism, however, neorealism situates the causes of international outcomes in the structure of the international system.

Waltz's book unleashed a wave of critical responses. This was largely due to the theory's elegance, sophistication, and power. There is little doubt, however, that it also benefited from Waltz's polemical style, especially in the earlier chapters' scathing attacks on previous attempts at systemic theorizing. While the book triggered some famous fights (Waltz's feud with Morton Kaplan is perhaps the most notorious), more importantly, it sparked a series of substantive debates, which shaped much of the research in the international relations subfield. The book reenergized old debates about the causes of war and the chances for international cooperation, and spawned new ones about the importance of relative gains and the formation of states' interests and identities.

Taken together, the readings presented in this chapter cover the foundational principles of neorealism, while situating it within the larger realist tradition. The first two readings are both selections from *Theory of International Politics*. The first details Waltz's three-part definition of political structure—an ordering principle, the functional differentiation of units, and the distribution of capabilities—which Waltz uses to do much of the heavy lifting in his theory. In international relations, the absence of an overarching authority means that the ordering principle is anarchy (in contrast to domestic systems where it is hierarchy). As a consequence, all states are compelled to practice self-help, which means they are forced to remain functionally alike. This leaves the distribution of capabilities, which Waltz defines in terms of polarity, as the only structural variable in his theory.

In the second selection from *Theory of International Politics*, Waltz expands on his definition of structure, and suggests how it has resulted in a range of behavior and international political outcomes over the millennia. The reading covers several of Waltz's key concepts, including how relative gains concerns restrict cooperation between states, how systemic interactions produce unintended consequences, the centrality of nation states, and the importance of force. Waltz then lays out an automatic balance of power theory, which, like Jervis' version (see Chapter 3 of this volume) has only a few assumptions. Waltz uses his discussion of balance of power theory to distinguish internal and external balancing, to differentiate balancing and bandwagoning, to suggest the automaticity of the tendency

toward balance regardless of the intentions of the actors, and to differentiate between theories of foreign policy and theories of international politics.

In “Realist thought and neorealist theory,” Waltz distinguishes neorealism from classical realism, with a particular focus on differentiating the theory from Morgenthau’s *animus dominandi* approach. In addition to emphasizing a different approach (system structure versus state interaction), Waltz suggests that neorealism breaks from classical realism in treating power as a means to security, rather than as an end to be pursued for its own sake. He also shows how neorealism conceives of anarchy as a part of a distinct structure, rather than as a general background condition, and how that structure constrains heterogeneous states to behave in similar ways.

Finally, in “The origins of war in neorealist theory,” Waltz uses neorealism to study the causes of war. By adding the security dilemma to his theory, Waltz shows how it is possible for conflict to arise in an international system that is comprised of only security-seeking states. While Waltz argues that neorealism cannot explain the onset of particular wars, he suggests that it can explain when wars are most likely to occur. In particular, because of alliance flexibility and the prevalence of miscalculation, multipolar systems—those with three or more great powers—are said to be especially dangerous. The distinction between bipolar and multipolar systems is captured by the third element of Waltz’s discussion of structure in *Theory of International Politics*, the distribution of capabilities.

In *Theory of International Politics* and in his subsequent commentaries, Waltz was insistent about what should and should not be included in a systems theory, and what such a theory was able to accomplish. Hence, he has claimed to be agnostic about his theory’s microfoundations (e.g. rationality is not a requirement), argues that unit-level factors should be excluded from the theory, and refuses to use the theory to make foreign policy predictions. Very few (and perhaps no) modern realists adhere to these strict restraints on theorizing. Nevertheless, the structural realist research programs that followed all built on the strong foundations laid out in *Theory of International Politics*. Hence, even if not applied in its purest form, Waltz’s neorealism has had a lasting influence on scholars seeking to advance their own structural realist theories.

# Political structures

*Kenneth N. Waltz*

From: *Theory of International Politics* (Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 1979), Chapters 5 and 6.

## I

A system is composed of a structure and of interacting units. The structure is the system-wide component that makes it possible to think of the system as a whole. The problem, unsolved by the systems theorists . . . , is to contrive a definition of structure free of the attributes and the interactions of units. Definitions of structure must leave aside, or abstract from, the characteristics of units, their behavior, and their interactions. Why must those obviously important matters be omitted? They must be omitted so that we can distinguish between variables at the level of the units and variables at the level of the system. The problem is to develop theoretically useful concepts to replace the vague and varying systemic notions that are customarily employed— notions such as environment, situation, context, and milieu. Structure is a useful concept if it gives clear and fixed meaning to such vague and varying terms.

We know what we have to omit from any definition of structure if the definition is to be useful theoretically. Abstracting from the attributes of units means leaving aside questions about the kinds of political leaders, social and economic institutions, and ideological commitments states may have. Abstracting from relations means leaving aside questions about the cultural, economic, political, and military interactions of states. To say what is to be left out does not indicate what is to be put in. The negative point is important nevertheless because the instruction to omit attributes is often violated and the instruction to omit interactions almost always goes unobserved. But if attributes and interactions are omitted, what is left? The question is answered by considering the double meaning of the term “relation.” As S. F. Nadel points out, ordinary language obscures a distinction that is important in theory. “Relation” is used to mean both the interaction of units and the positions they occupy vis-à-vis each other (1957, pp. 8–11). To define a structure requires ignoring how units relate with one another (how they interact) and concentrating on how they stand in relation to one another (how they are arranged or positioned). Interactions, as I have insisted, take place at the level of the units. How units stand in relation to one another, the way they are arranged or positioned, is not a property of the units. The arrangement of units is a property of the system.

By leaving aside the personality of actors, their behavior, and their interactions, one arrives at a purely positional picture of society. Three propositions follow from this. First, structures may endure while personality, behavior, and interactions vary widely. Structure is sharply distinguished from actions and interactions. Second, a structural definition applies to realms of widely different substance so long as the arrangement of parts is similar (cf. Nadel, pp. 104–109). Third, because this is so, theories developed for one realm may with some modification be applicable to other realms as well.

A structure is defined by the arrangement of its parts. Only changes of arrangement are structural changes. A system is composed of a structure and of interacting parts. Both the structure and the parts are concepts, related to, but not identical with, real agents and agencies. Structure is not something we see. The anthropologist Meyer Fortes put this well. "When we describe structure," he said, "we are in the realm of grammar and syntax, not of the spoken word. We discern structure in the 'concrete reality' of social events only by virtue of having first established structure by abstraction from 'concrete reality'" (Fortes 1949, p. 56). Since structure is an abstraction, it cannot be defined by enumerating material characteristics of the system. It must instead be defined by the arrangement of the system's parts and by the principle of that arrangement.

This is an uncommon way to think of political systems, although structural notions are familiar enough to anthropologists, to economists, and even to political scientists who deal not with political systems in general but with such of their parts as political parties and bureaucracies. In defining structures, anthropologists do not ask about the habits and the values of the chiefs and the Indians; economists do not ask about the organization and the efficiency of particular firms and the exchanges among them; and political scientists do not ask about the personalities and the interests of the individuals occupying various offices. They leave aside the qualities, the motives, and the interactions of the actors, not because those matters are uninteresting or unimportant, but because they want to know how the qualities, the motives, and the interactions of tribal units are affected by tribal structure, how decisions of firms are influenced by their market, and how people's behavior is molded by the offices they hold.

## II

The concept of structure is based on the fact that units differently juxtaposed and combined behave differently and in interacting produce different outcomes. I first want to show how internal political structure can be defined. In a book on international-political theory, domestic political structure has to be examined in order to draw a distinction between expectations about behavior and outcomes in the internal and external realms. Moreover, considering domestic political structure now will make the elusive international-political structure easier to catch later on.

Structure defines the arrangement, or the ordering, of the parts of a system. Structure is not a collection of political institutions but rather the arrangement of them. How is the arrangement defined? The constitution of a state describes some parts of the arrangement, but political structures as they develop are not identical with formal constitutions. In defining structures, the first question to answer is this: What is the principle by which the parts are arranged?

Domestic politics is hierarchically ordered. The units—institutions and agencies—stand vis-à-vis each other in relations of super- and subordination. The ordering principle of a system gives the first, and basic, bit of information about how the parts of a realm are related to each other. In a polity the hierarchy of offices is by no means completely articulated, nor are all ambiguities about relations of super- and subordination removed. Nevertheless, political actors are formally differentiated according to the degrees of their authority, and their distinct functions are specified . . . The specification of functions of formally differentiated parts gives the second bit of structural information. This second part of the definition adds some content to the structure, but only enough to say more fully how the units stand in relation to one another. The roles and the functions of the British



Prime Minister and Parliament, for example, differ from those of the American President and Congress. When offices are juxtaposed and functions are combined in different ways, different behaviors and outcomes result, as I shall shortly show.

The placement of units in relation to one another is not fully defined by a system's ordering principle and by the formal differentiation of its parts. The standing of the units also changes with changes in their relative capabilities. In the performance of their functions, agencies may gain capabilities or lose them. The relation of Prime Minister to Parliament and of President to Congress depends on, and varies with, their relative capabilities. The third part of the definition of structure acknowledges that even while specified functions remain unchanged, units come to stand in different relation to each other through changes in relative capability.

A domestic political structure is thus defined, first, according to the principle by which it is ordered; second, by specification of the functions of formally differentiated units; and third, by the distribution of capabilities across those units. Structure is a highly abstract notion, but the definition of structure does not abstract from everything. To do so would be to leave everything aside and to include nothing at all. The three-part definition of structure includes only what is required to show how the units of the system are positioned or arranged. Everything else is omitted. Concern for tradition and culture, analysis of the character and personality of political actors, consideration of the conflictive and accommodative processes of politics, description of the making and execution of policy—all such matters are left aside. Their omission does not imply their unimportance. They are omitted because we want to figure out the expected effects of structure on process and of process on structure. That can be done only if structure and process are distinctly defined . . .

Political structure produces a similarity in process and performance so long as a structure endures. Similarity is not uniformity. Structure operates as a cause, but it is not the only cause in play. How can one know whether observed effects are caused by the structure of national politics rather than by a changing cast of political characters, by variations of nonpolitical circumstances, and by a host of other factors? How can one separate structural from other causes? . . .

Within a country one can identify the effects of structure by noticing *differences* of behavior in differently structured parts of the polity. From one country to another, one can identify the effects of structure by noticing *similarities* of behavior in polities of similar structure. Thus Chihiro Hosoya's description of the behavior of Prime Ministers in postwar Japan's parliamentary system exactly fits British Prime Ministers (1974, pp. 366–69). Despite cultural and other differences, similar structures produce similar effects.

### III

I defined domestic political structures first by the principle according to which they are organized or ordered, second by the differentiation of units and the specification of their functions, and third by the distribution of capabilities across units. Let us see how the three terms of the definition apply to international politics.

#### *1. Ordering principles*

Structural questions are questions about the arrangement of the parts of a system. The parts of domestic political systems stand in relations of super- and subordination. Some are

entitled to command; others are required to obey. Domestic systems are centralized and hierarchic. The parts of international-political systems stand in relations of coordination. Formally, each is the equal of all the others. None is entitled to command; none is required to obey. International systems are decentralized and anarchic. The ordering principles of the two structures are distinctly different, indeed, contrary to each other. Domestic political structures have governmental institutions and offices as their concrete counterparts. International politics, in contrast, has been called "politics in the absence of government" (Fox 1959, p. 35). International organizations do exist, and in ever-growing numbers. Supranational agents able to act effectively, however, either themselves acquire some of the attributes and capabilities of states, as did the medieval papacy in the era of Innocent III, or they soon reveal their inability to act in important ways except with the support, or at least the acquiescence, of the principal states concerned with the matters at hand. Whatever elements of authority emerge internationally are barely once removed from the capability that provides the foundation for the appearance of those elements. Authority quickly reduces to a particular expression of capability. In the absence of agents with system-wide authority, formal relations of super- and subordination fail to develop.

The first term of a structural definition states the principle by which the system is ordered. Structure is an organizational concept. The prominent characteristic of international politics, however, seems to be the lack of order and of organization. How can one think of international politics as being any kind of an order at all? The anarchy of politics internationally is often referred to. If structure is an organizational concept, the terms "structure" and "anarchy" seem to be in contradiction. If international politics is "politics in the absence of government," what are we in the presence of? In looking for international structure, one is brought face to face with the invisible, an uncomfortable position to be in.

The problem is this: how to conceive of an order without an orderer and of organizational effects where formal organization is lacking. Because these are difficult questions, I shall answer them through analogy with microeconomic theory. Reasoning by analogy is helpful where one can move from a domain for which theory is well developed to one where it is not. Reasoning by analogy is permissible where different domains are structurally similar.

Classical economic theory, developed by Adam Smith and his followers, is microtheory. Political scientists tend to think that microtheory is theory about small-scale matters, a usage that ill accords with its established meaning. The term "micro" in economic theory indicates the way in which the theory is constructed rather than the scope of the matters it pertains to. Microeconomic theory describes how an order is spontaneously formed from the self-interested acts and interactions of individual units—in this case, persons and firms. The theory then turns upon the two central concepts of the economic units and of the market. Economic units and economic markets are concepts, not descriptive realities or concrete entities. This must be emphasized since from the early eighteenth century to the present, from the sociologist Auguste Comte to the psychologist George Katona, economic theory has been faulted because its assumptions fail to correspond with realities (Martineau 1853, II, 51–53; Katona 1953). Unrealistically, economic theorists conceive of an economy operating in isolation from its society and polity. Unrealistically, economists assume that the economic world is the whole of the world. Unrealistically, economists think of the acting unit, the famous "economic man," as a single-minded profit maximizer. They single out one aspect of man and leave aside the wondrous variety of human life. As any moderately sensible economist knows, "economic man" does not exist. Anyone who asks businessmen how they make their decisions will find that the assumption that men are economic maximizers grossly distorts their characters. The assumption that men behave as economic

men, which is known to be false as a descriptive statement, turns out to be useful in the construction of theory.

Markets are the second major concept invented by microeconomic theorists. Two general questions must be asked about markets: How are they formed? How do they work? The answer to the first question is this: The market of a decentralized economy is individualist in origin, spontaneously generated, and unintended. The market arises out of the activities of separate units—persons and firms—whose aims and efforts are directed not toward creating an order but rather toward fulfilling their own internally defined interests by whatever means they can muster. The individual unit acts for itself. From the coaction of like units emerges a structure that affects and constrains all of them. Once formed, a market becomes a force in itself, and a force that the constitutive units acting singly or in small numbers cannot control. Instead, in lesser or greater degree as market conditions vary, the creators become the creatures of the market that their activity gave rise to. Adam Smith's great achievement was to show how self-interested, greed-driven actions may produce good social outcomes if only political and social conditions permit free competition. If a *laissez-faire* economy is harmonious, it is so because the intentions of actors do *not* correspond with the outcomes their actions produce. What intervenes between the actors and the objects of their action in order to thwart their purposes? To account for the unexpectedly favorable outcomes of selfish acts, the concept of a market is brought into play. Each unit seeks its own good; the result of a number of units simultaneously doing so transcends the motives and the aims of the separate units. Each would like to work less hard and price his product higher. Taken together, all have to work harder and price their products lower. Each firm seeks to increase its profit; the result of many firms doing so drives the profit rate downward. Each man seeks his own end, and, in doing so, produces a result that was no part of his intention. Out of the mean ambition of its members, the greater good of society is produced . . .

International-political systems, like economic markets, are formed by the coaction of self-regarding units. International structures are defined in terms of the primary political units of an era, be they city states, empires, or nations. Structures emerge from the coexistence of states. No state intends to participate in the formation of a structure by which it and others will be constrained. International-political systems, like economic markets, are individualist in origin, spontaneously generated, and unintended. In both systems, structures are formed by the coaction of their units. Whether those units live, prosper, or die depends on their own efforts. Both systems are formed and maintained on a principle of self-help that applies to the units. To say that the two realms are structurally similar is not to proclaim their identity. Economically, the self-help principle applies within governmentally contrived limits. Market economies are hedged about in ways that channel energies constructively. One may think of pure food-and-drug standards, antitrust laws, securities and exchange regulations, laws against shooting a competitor, and rules forbidding false claims in advertising. International politics is more nearly a realm in which anything goes. International politics is structurally similar to a market economy insofar as the self-help principle is allowed to operate in the latter.

In a microtheory, whether of international politics or of economics, the motivation of the actors is assumed rather than realistically described. I assume that states seek to ensure their survival. The assumption is a radical simplification made for the sake of constructing a theory. The question to ask of the assumption, as ever, is not whether it is true but whether it is the most sensible and useful one that can be made. Whether it is a useful assumption depends on whether a theory based on the assumption can be contrived, a theory from which

important consequences not otherwise obvious can be inferred. Whether it is a sensible assumption can be directly discussed.

Beyond the survival motive, the aims of states may be endlessly varied; they may range from the ambition to conquer the world to the desire merely to be left alone. Survival is a prerequisite to achieving any goals that states may have, other than the goal of promoting their own disappearance as political entities. The survival motive is taken as the ground of action in a world where the security of states is not assured, rather than as a realistic description of the impulse that lies behind every act of state. The assumption allows for the fact that no state always acts exclusively to ensure its survival. It allows for the fact that some states may persistently seek goals that they value more highly than survival; they may, for example, prefer amalgamation with other states to their own survival in form. It allows for the fact that in pursuit of its security no state will act with perfect knowledge and wisdom—if indeed we could know what those terms might mean. Some systems have high requirements for their functioning. Traffic will not flow if most, but not all, people drive on the proper side of the road. If necessary, strong measures have to be taken to ensure that everyone does so. Other systems have medium requirements. Elevators in skyscrapers are planned so that they can handle the passenger load if most people take express elevators for the longer runs and locals only for the shorter ones. But if some people choose locals for long runs because the speed of the express makes them dizzy, the system will not break down. To keep it going, most, but not all, people have to act as expected. Some systems, market economies and international politics among them, make still lower demands. Traffic systems are designed on the knowledge that the system's requirements will be enforced. Elevators are planned with extra capacity to allow for human vagaries. Competitive economic and international-political systems work differently. Out of the interactions of their parts they develop structures that reward or punish behavior that conforms more or less nearly to what is required of one who wishes to succeed in the system . . . Why should a would-be Prime Minister not strike out on a bold course of his own? Why not behave in ways markedly different from those of typical British political leaders? Anyone can, of course, and some who aspire to become Prime Ministers do so. They rarely come to the top. Except in deepest crisis, the system selects others to hold the highest office. One may behave as one likes to. Patterns of behavior nevertheless emerge, and they derive from the structural constraints of the system.

Actors may perceive the structure that constrains them and understand how it serves to reward some kinds of behavior and to penalize others. But then again they either may not see it or, seeing it, may for any of many reasons fail to conform their actions to the patterns that are most often rewarded and least often punished. To say that "the structure selects" means simply that those who conform to accepted and successful practices more often rise to the top and are likelier to stay there. The game one has to win is defined by the structure that determines the kind of player who is likely to prosper.

Where selection according to behavior occurs, no enforced standard of behavior is required for the system to operate, although either system may work better if some standards are enforced or accepted. Internationally, the environment of states' action, or the structure of their system, is set by the fact that some states prefer survival over other ends obtainable in the short run and act with relative efficiency to achieve that end. States may alter their behavior because of the structure they form through interaction with other states. But in what ways and why? To answer these questions we must complete the definition of international structure.

## 2. *The character of the units*

The second term in the definition of domestic political structure specifies the functions performed by differentiated units. Hierarchy entails relations of super- and subordination among a system's parts, and that implies their differentiation. In defining domestic political structure the second term, like the first and third, is needed because each term points to a possible source of structural variation. The states that are the units of international-political systems are not formally differentiated by the functions they perform. Anarchy entails relations of coordination among a system's units, and that implies their sameness. The second term is not needed in defining international-political structure, because so long as anarchy endures, states remain like units. International structures vary only through a change of organizing principle or, failing that, through variations in the capabilities of units. Nevertheless I shall discuss these like units here, because it is by their interactions that international-political structures are generated.

Two questions arise: Why should states be taken as the units of the system? Given a wide variety of states, how can one call them "like units"? . . .

States are not and never have been the only international actors. But then structures are defined not by all of the actors that flourish within them but by the major ones. In defining a system's structure one chooses one or some of the infinitely many objects comprising the system and defines its structure in terms of them. For international-political systems, as for any system, one must first decide which units to take as being the parts of the system . . .

States are the units whose interactions form the structure of international-political systems. They will long remain so. The death rate among states is remarkably low. Few states die; many firms do. Who is likely to be around 100 years from now—the United States, the Soviet Union, France, Egypt, Thailand, and Uganda? Or Ford, IBM, Shell, Unilever, and Massey-Ferguson? I would bet on the states, perhaps even on Uganda. But what does it mean to refer to the 150-odd states of today's world, which certainly form a motley collection, as being "like units"? Many students of international politics are bothered by the description . . .

States vary widely in size, wealth, power, and form. And yet variations in these and in other respects are variations among like units. In what way are they like units? How can they be placed in a single category? States are alike in the tasks that they face, though not in their abilities to perform them. The differences are of capability, not of function. States perform or try to perform tasks, most of which are common to all of them; the ends they aspire to are similar. Each state duplicates the activities of other states at least to a considerable extent. Each state has its agencies for making, executing, and interpreting laws and regulations, for raising revenues, and for defending itself. Each state supplies out of its own resources and by its own means most of the food, clothing, housing, transportation, and amenities consumed and used by its citizens. All states, except the smallest ones, do much more of their business at home than abroad. One has to be impressed with the functional similarity of states and, now more than ever before, with the similar lines their development follows. From the rich to the poor states, from the old to the new ones, nearly all of them take a larger hand in matters of economic regulation, of education, health, and housing, of culture and the arts, and so on almost endlessly. The increase of the activities of states is a strong and strikingly uniform international trend. The functions of states are similar, and distinctions among them arise principally from their varied capabilities. National politics consists of differentiated units performing specified functions. International politics consists of like units duplicating one another's activities.

### 3. *The distribution of capabilities*

The parts of a hierarchic system are related to one another in ways that are determined both by their functional differentiation and by the extent of their capabilities. The units of an anarchic system are functionally undifferentiated. The units of such an order are then distinguished primarily by their greater or lesser capabilities for performing similar tasks. This states formally what students of international politics have long noticed. The great powers of an era have always been marked off from others by practitioners and theorists alike. Students of national government make such distinctions as that between parliamentary and presidential systems; governmental systems differ in form. Students of international politics make distinctions between international-political systems only according to the number of their great powers. The structure of a system changes with changes in the distribution of capabilities across the system's units. And changes in structure change expectations about how the units of the system will behave and about the outcomes their interactions will produce . . .

. . . Defining structure partly in terms of the distribution of capabilities seems to violate my instruction to keep unit attributes out of structural definitions. As I remarked earlier, structure is a highly but not entirely abstract concept. The maximum of abstraction allows a minimum of content, and that minimum is what is needed to enable one to say how the units stand in relation to one another. States are differently placed by their power. And yet one may wonder why only *capability* is included in the third part of the definition, and not such characteristics as ideology, form of government, peacefulness, bellicosity, or whatever. The answer is this: Power is estimated by comparing the capabilities of a number of units. Although capabilities are attributes of units, the distribution of capabilities across units is not. The distribution of capabilities is not a unit attribute, but rather a system-wide concept. Again, the parallel with market theory is exact. Both firms and states are like units. Through all of their variations in form, firms share certain qualities: They are self-regarding units that, within governmentally imposed limits, decide for themselves how to cope with their environment and just how to work for their ends. Variation of structure is introduced, not through differences in the character and function of units, but only through distinctions made among them according to their capabilities.

. . . Though relations defined in terms of interactions must be excluded from structural definitions, relations defined in terms of groupings of states do seem to tell us something about how states are placed in the system. Why not specify how states stand in relation to one another by considering the alliances they form? Would doing so not be comparable to defining national political structures partly in terms of how presidents and prime ministers are related to other political agents? It would not be. Nationally as internationally, structural definitions deal with the relation of agents and agencies in terms of the organization of realms and not in terms of the accommodations and conflicts that may occur within them or the groupings that may now and then form. Parts of a government may draw together or pull apart, may oppose each other or cooperate in greater or lesser degree. These are the relations that form and dissolve within a system rather than structural alterations that mark a change from one system to another. This is made clear by an example that runs nicely parallel to the case of alliances. Distinguishing systems of political parties according to their number is common. A multiparty system changes if, say, eight parties become two, but not if two groupings of the eight form merely for the occasion of fighting an election. By the same logic, an international-political system in which three or more great powers have split into two alliances remains a multipolar system—structurally distinct from a bipolar system, a

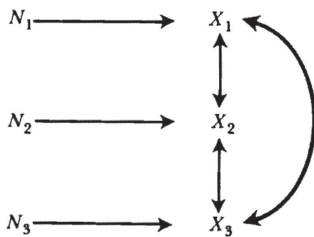


system in which no third power is able to challenge the top two. In defining market structure, information about the particular quality of firms is not called for, nor is information about their interactions, short of the point at which the formal merger of firms significantly reduces their number. In the definition of market structure, firms are not identified and their interactions are not described. To take the qualities of firms and the nature of their interactions as being parts of market structure would be to say that whether a sector of an economy is oligopolistic or not depends on how the firms are organized internally and how they deal with one another, rather than simply on how many major firms coexist. Market structure is defined by counting firms; international-political structure, by counting states. In the counting, distinctions are made only according to capabilities.

In defining international-political structures we take states with whatever traditions, habits, objectives, desires, and forms of government they may have. We do not ask whether states are revolutionary or legitimate, authoritarian or democratic, ideological or pragmatic. We abstract from every attribute of states except their capabilities. Nor in thinking about structure do we ask about the relations of states—their feelings of friendship and hostility, their diplomatic exchanges, the alliances they form, and the extent of the contacts and exchanges among them. We ask what range of expectations arises merely from looking at the type of order that prevails among them and at the distribution of capabilities within that order. We abstract from any particular qualities of states and from all of their concrete connections. What emerges is a positional picture, a general description of the ordered overall arrangement of a society written in terms of the placement of units rather than in terms of their qualities.

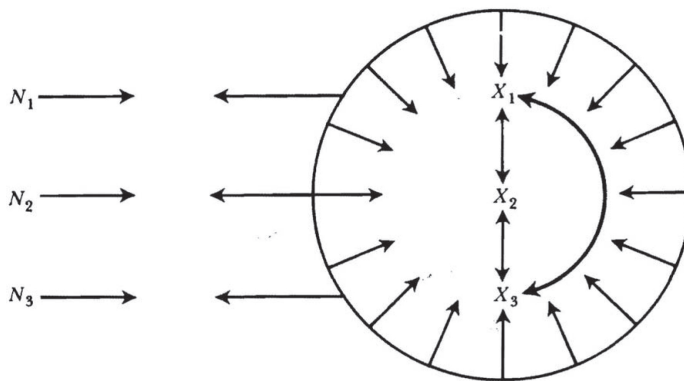
#### IV

I have now defined the two essential elements of a systems theory of international politics—the structure of the system and its interacting units. In doing so I have broken sharply away from common approaches. As we have seen, some scholars who attempt systems approaches to international politics conceive of a system as being the product of its interacting parts, but they fail to consider whether anything at the systems level affects those parts. Other systems theorists, like students of international politics in general, mention at times that the effects of the international environment must be allowed for; but they pass over the question of how this is to be done and quickly return their attention to the level of interacting units. Most students, whether or not they claim to follow a systems approach, think of international politics in the way Fig. [1] suggests.  $N_{1,2,3}$  are states internally generating their external effects.  $X_{1,2,3}$  are states acting externally and interacting with each other. No systemic force or factor shows up in the picture.



[Figure 1]

Because systemic effects are evident, international politics should be seen as in Fig. [2]. The circle represents the structure of an international-political system. As the arrows indicate, it affects both the interactions of states and their attributes.<sup>1</sup> Although structure as an organizational concept has proved elusive, its meaning can be explained simply. While states retain their autonomy, each stands in a specifiable relation to the others. They form some sort of an order. We can use the term “organization” to cover this preinstitutional condition if we think of an organization as simply a constraint, in the manner of W. Ross Ashby (1956, p. 131). Because states constrain and limit each other, international politics can be viewed in rudimentary organizational terms. Structure is the concept that makes it possible to say what the expected organizational effects are and how structures and units interact and affect each other.



[Figure 2]

Thinking of structure as I have defined it solves the problem of separating changes at the level of the units from changes at the level of the system. If one is concerned with the different expected effects of different systems, one must be able to distinguish changes of systems from changes within them, something that would-be systems theorists have found exceedingly difficult to do. A three-part definition of structure enables one to discriminate between those types of changes:

- Structures are defined, first, according to the principle by which a system is ordered. Systems are transformed if one ordering principle replaces another. To move from an anarchic to a hierarchic realm is to move from one system to another.
- Structures are defined, second, by the specification of functions of differentiated units. Hierarchic systems change if functions are differently defined and allotted. For anarchic systems, the criterion of systems change derived from the second part of the definition drops out since the system is composed of like units.
- Structures are defined, third, by the distribution of capabilities across units. Changes in this distribution are changes of system whether the system be an anarchic or a hierarchic one.

## Note

- 1 No essentials are omitted from Fig. 2, but some complications are. A full picture would include, for example, coalitions possibly forming on the right-hand side.

# Anarchic orders and balances of power

*Kenneth N. Waltz*

## I

### *1. Violence at home and abroad*

The state among states, it is often said, conducts its affairs in the brooding shadow of violence. Because some states may at any time use force, all states must be prepared to do so—or live at the mercy of their militarily more vigorous neighbors. Among states, the state of nature is a state of war. This is meant not in the sense that war constantly occurs but in the sense that, with each state deciding for itself whether or not to use force, war may at any time break out. Whether in the family, the community, or the world at large, contact without at least occasional conflict is inconceivable; and the hope that in the absence of an agent to manage or to manipulate conflicting parties the use of force will always be avoided cannot be realistically entertained. Among men as among states, anarchy, or the absence of government, is associated with the occurrence of violence . . .

If anarchy is identified with chaos, destruction, and death, then the distinction between anarchy and government does not tell us much. Which is more precarious: the life of a state among states, or of a government in relation to its subjects? The answer varies with time and place. Among some states at some times, the actual or expected occurrence of violence is low. Within some states at some times, the actual or expected occurrence of violence is high. The use of force, or the constant fear of its use, are not sufficient grounds for distinguishing international from domestic affairs. If the possible and the actual use of force mark both national and international orders, then no durable distinction between the two realms can be drawn in terms of the use or the nonuse of force. No human order is proof against violence.

To discover qualitative differences between internal and external affairs one must look for a criterion other than the occurrence of violence. The distinction between international and national realms of politics is not found in the use or the nonuse of force but in their different structures. But if the dangers of being violently attacked are greater, say, in taking an evening stroll through downtown Detroit than they are in picnicking along the French and German border, what practical difference does the difference of structure make? Nationally as internationally, contact generates conflict and at times issues in violence. The difference between national and international politics lies not in the use of force but in the different modes of organization for doing something about it. A government, ruling by some standard of legitimacy, arrogates to itself the right to use force—that is, to apply a variety of sanctions to control the use of force by its subjects. If some use private force, others may appeal to the government. A government has no monopoly on the use of force, as is all too evident. An effective government, however, has a monopoly on the *legitimate* use of force, and

legitimate here means that public agents are organized to prevent and to counter the private use of force. Citizens need not prepare to defend themselves. Public agencies do that. A national system is not one of self-help. The international system is.

## ***2. Interdependence and integration***

. . . Differences between national and international structures are reflected in the ways the units of each system define their ends and develop the means for reaching them. In anarchic realms, like units coact. In hierarchic realms, unlike units interact. In an anarchic realm, the units are functionally similar and tend to remain so. Like units work to maintain a measure of independence and may even strive for autarchy. In a hierarchic realm, the units are differentiated, and they tend to increase the extent of their specialization. Differentiated units become closely interdependent, the more closely so as their specialization proceeds. Because of the difference of structure, interdependence within and interdependence among nations are two distinct concepts. So as to follow the logicians' admonition to keep a single meaning for a given term throughout one's discourse, I shall use "integration" to describe the condition within nations and "interdependence" to describe the condition among them.

Although states are like units functionally, they differ vastly in their capabilities. Out of such differences something of a division of labor develops . . . The division of labor across nations, however, is slight in comparison with the highly articulated division of labor within them. Integration draws the parts of a nation closely together. Interdependence among nations leaves them loosely connected. Although the integration of nations is often talked about, it seldom takes place. Nations could mutually enrich themselves by further dividing not just the labor that goes into the production of goods but also some of the other tasks they perform, such as political management and military defense. Why does their integration not take place? The structure of international politics limits the cooperation of states in two ways.

In a self-help system each of the units spends a portion of its effort, not in forwarding its own good, but in providing the means of protecting itself against others. Specialization in a system of divided labor works to everyone's advantage, though not equally so. Inequality in the expected distribution of the increased product works strongly against extension of the division of labor internationally. When faced with the possibility of cooperating for mutual gain, states that feel insecure must ask how the gain will be divided. They are compelled to ask not "Will both of us gain?" but "Who will gain more?" If an expected gain is to be divided, say, in the ratio of two to one, one state may use its disproportionate gain to implement a policy intended to damage or destroy the other. Even the prospect of large absolute gains for both parties does not elicit their cooperation so long as each fears how the other will use its increased capabilities. Notice that the impediments to collaboration may not lie in the character and the immediate intention of either party. Instead, the condition of insecurity—at the least, the uncertainty of each about the other's future intentions and actions—works against their cooperation . . .

A state worries about a division of possible gains that may favor others more than itself. That is the first way in which the structure of international politics limits the cooperation of states. A state also worries lest it become dependent on others through cooperative endeavors and exchanges of goods and services. That is the second way in which the structure of international politics limits the cooperation of states. The more a state specializes, the more it relies on others to supply the materials and goods that it is not producing. The larger a state's imports and exports, the more it depends on others. The world's well-being would be increased if an ever more elaborate division of labor were developed, but states would

thereby place themselves in situations of ever closer interdependence. Some states may not resist that. For small and ill-endowed states the costs of doing so are excessively high. But states that can resist becoming ever more enmeshed with others ordinarily do so in either or both of two ways. States that are heavily dependent, or closely interdependent, worry about securing that which they depend on. The high interdependence of states means that the states in question experience, or are subject to, the common vulnerability that high interdependence entails. Like other organizations, states seek to control what they depend on or to lessen the extent of their dependency. This simple thought explains quite a bit of the behavior of states: their imperial thrusts to widen the scope of their control and their autarchic strivings toward greater self-sufficiency . . .

### ***3. Structures and strategies***

That motives and outcomes may well be disjoined should now be easily seen. Structures cause actions to have consequences they were not intended to have. Surely most of the actors will notice that, and at least some of them will be able to figure out why. They may develop a pretty good sense of just how structures work their effects. Will they not then be able to achieve their original ends by appropriately adjusting their strategies? Unfortunately, they often cannot . . .

Structural constraints cannot be wished away, although many fail to understand this. In every age and place, the units of self-help systems—nations, corporations, or whatever—are told that the greater good, along with their own, requires them to act for the sake of the system and not for their own narrowly defined advantage. In the 1950s, as fear of the world's destruction in nuclear war grew, some concluded that the alternative to world destruction was world disarmament. In the 1970s, with the rapid growth of population, poverty, and pollution, some concluded, as one political scientist put it, that "states must meet the needs of the political ecosystem in its global dimensions or court annihilation" (Sterling 1974, p. 336). The international interest must be served; and if that means anything at all, it means that national interests are subordinate to it. The problems are found at the global level. Solutions to the problems continue to depend on national policies. What are the conditions that would make nations more or less willing to obey the injunctions that are so often laid on them? How can they resolve the tension between pursuing their own interests and acting for the sake of the system? No one has shown how that can be done, although many wring their hands and plead for rational behavior. The very problem, however, is that rational behavior, given structural constraints, does not lead to the wanted results. With each country constrained to take care of itself, no one can take care of the system.<sup>1</sup>

A strong sense of peril and doom may lead to a clear definition of ends that must be achieved. Their achievement is not thereby made possible. The possibility of effective action depends on the ability to provide necessary means. It depends even more so on the existence of conditions that permit nations and other organizations to follow appropriate policies and strategies. World-shaking problems cry for global solutions, but there is no global agency to provide them. Necessities do not create possibilities. Wishing that final causes were efficient ones does not make them so.

Great tasks can be accomplished only by agents of great capability. That is why states, and especially the major ones, are called on to do what is necessary for the world's survival. But states have to do whatever they think necessary for their own preservation, since no one can be relied on to do it for them . . .

Some have hoped that changes in the awareness and purpose, in the organization and ideology, of states would change the quality of international life. Over the centuries states

have changed in many ways, but the quality of international life has remained much the same. States may seek reasonable and worthy ends, but they cannot figure out how to reach them. The problem is not in their stupidity or ill will, although one does not want to claim that those qualities are lacking. The depth of the difficulty is not understood until one realizes that intelligence and goodwill cannot discover and act on adequate programs. Early in this century Winston Churchill observed that the British-German naval race promised disaster *and* that Britain had no realistic choice other than to run it. States facing global problems are like individual consumers trapped by the “tyranny of small decisions.” States, like consumers, can get out of the trap only by changing the structure of their field of activity. The message bears repeating: The only remedy for a strong structural effect is a structural change.

#### 4. *The virtues of anarchy*

To achieve their objectives and maintain their security, units in a condition of anarchy—be they people, corporations, states, or whatever—must rely on the means they can generate and the arrangements they can make for themselves. Self-help is necessarily the principle of action in an anarchic order. A self-help situation is one of high risk—of bankruptcy in the economic realm and of war in a world of free states . . .

Whether or not by force, each state plots the course it thinks will best serve its interests. If force is used by one state or its use is expected, the recourse of other states is to use force or be prepared to use it singly or in combination. No appeal can be made to a higher entity clothed with the authority and equipped with the ability to act on its own initiative. Under such conditions the possibility that force will be used by one or another of the parties looms always as a threat in the background. In politics force is said to be the *ultima ratio*. In international politics force serves, not only as the *ultima ratio*, but indeed as the first and constant one. To limit force to being the *ultima ratio* of politics implies, in the words of Ortega y Gasset, “the previous submission of force to methods of reason” (quoted in Johnson 1966, p. 13). The constant possibility that force will be used limits manipulations, moderates demands, and serves as an incentive for the settlement of disputes. One who knows that pressing too hard may lead to war has strong reason to consider whether possible gains are worth the risks entailed. The threat of force internationally is comparable to the role of the strike in labor and management bargaining. “The few strikes that take place are in a sense,” as Livernash has said, “the cost of the strike option which produces settlements in the large mass of negotiations” (1963, p. 430). Even if workers seldom strike, their doing so is always a possibility. The possibility of industrial disputes leading to long and costly strikes encourages labor and management to face difficult issues, to try to understand each other’s problems, and to work hard to find accommodations. The possibility that conflicts among nations may lead to long and costly wars has similarly sobering effects . . .

## II

How can a theory of international politics be constructed? Just as any theory must be. . . . [F]irst, one must conceive of international politics as a bounded realm or domain; second, one must discover some law-like regularities within it; and third, one must develop a way of explaining the observed regularities . . . Wherever agents and agencies are coupled by force and competition rather than by authority and law, we expect to find such behaviors and outcomes. They are closely identified with the approach to politics suggested by the rubric, *Realpolitik*. The elements of *Realpolitik*, exhaustively listed, are these: The ruler’s, and later



the state's, interest provides the spring of action; the necessities of policy arise from the unregulated competition of states; calculation based on these necessities can discover the policies that will best serve a state's interests; success is the ultimate test of policy, and success is defined as preserving and strengthening the state. Ever since Machiavelli, interest and necessity—and *raison d'état*, the phrase that comprehends them—have remained the key concepts of *Realpolitik*. From Machiavelli through Meinecke and Morgenthau the elements of the approach and the reasoning remain constant. Machiavelli stands so clearly as the exponent of *Realpolitik* that one easily slips into thinking that he developed the closely associated idea of balance of power as well. Although he did not, his conviction that politics can be explained in its own terms established the ground on which balance-of-power theory can be built.

*Realpolitik* indicates the methods by which foreign policy is conducted and provides a rationale for them. Structural constraints explain why the methods are repeatedly used despite differences in the persons and states who use them. Balance-of-power theory purports to explain the result that such methods produce. Rather, that is what the theory should do. If there is any distinctively political theory of international politics, balance-of-power theory is it. And yet one cannot find a statement of the theory that is generally accepted. Carefully surveying the copious balance-of-power literature, Ernst Haas discovered eight distinct meanings of the term, and Martin Wight found nine (1953, 1966). Hans Morgenthau, in his profound historical and analytic treatment of the subject, makes use of four different definitions (1973). Balance of power is seen by some as being akin to a law of nature; by others, as simply an outrage. Some view it as a guide to statesmen; others as a cloak that disguises their imperialist policies. Some believe that a balance of power is the best guarantee of the security of states and the peace of the world; others, that it has ruined states by causing most of the wars they have fought.<sup>2</sup>

To believe that one can cut through such confusion may seem quixotic. I shall nevertheless try. It will help to hark back to several basic propositions about theory. (1) A theory contains at least one theoretical assumption. Such assumptions are not factual. One therefore cannot legitimately ask if they are true, but only if they are useful. (2) Theories must be evaluated in terms of what they claim to explain. Balance-of-power theory claims to explain the results of states' actions, under given conditions, and those results may not be foreshadowed in any of the actors' motives or be contained as objectives in their policies. (3) Theory, as a general explanatory system, cannot account for particularities.

Most of the confusions in balance-of-power theory, and criticisms of it, derive from misunderstanding these three points. A balance-of-power theory, properly stated, begins with assumptions about states: They are unitary actors who, at a minimum, seek their own preservation and, at a maximum, drive for universal domination. States, or those who act for them, try in more or less sensible ways to use the means available in order to achieve the ends in view. Those means fall into two categories: internal efforts (moves to increase economic capability, to increase military strength, to develop clever strategies) and external efforts (moves to strengthen and enlarge one's own alliance or to weaken and shrink an opposing one). The external game of alignment and realignment requires three or more players, and it is usually said that balance-of-power systems require at least that number. The statement is false, for in a two-power system the politics of balance continue, but the way to compensate for an incipient external disequilibrium is primarily by intensifying one's internal efforts. To the assumptions of the theory we then add the condition for its operation: that two or more states coexist in a self-help system, one with no superior agent to come to the aid of states that may be weakening or to deny to any of them the use of whatever instruments they think will serve their purposes. The theory, then, is built up from

the assumed motivations of states and the actions that correspond to them. It describes the constraints that arise from the system that those actions produce, and it indicates the expected outcome: namely, the formation of balances of power. Balance-of-power theory is microtheory precisely in the economist's sense. The system, like a market in economics, is made by the actions and interactions of its units, and the theory is based on assumptions about their behavior.

A self-help system is one in which those who do not help themselves, or who do so less effectively than others, will fail to prosper, will lay themselves open to dangers, will suffer. Fear of such unwanted consequences stipulates states to behave in ways that tend toward the creation of balances of power. Notice that the theory requires no assumptions of rationality or of constancy of will on the part of all of the actors. The theory says simply that if some do relatively well, others will emulate them or fall by the wayside. Obviously, the system won't work if all states lose interest in preserving themselves. It will, however, continue to work if some states do, while others do not, choose to lose their political identities, say, through amalgamation. Nor need it be assumed that all of the competing states are striving relentlessly to increase their power. The possibility that force may be used by some states to weaken or destroy others does, however, make it difficult for them to break out of the competitive system.

The meaning and importance of the theory are made clear by examining prevalent misconceptions of it. Recall our first proposition about theory. A theory contains assumptions that are theoretical, not factual. One of the most common misunderstandings of balance-of-power theory centers on this point. The theory is criticized because its assumptions are erroneous. The following statement can stand for a host of others:

If nations were in fact unchanging units with no permanent ties to each other, and if all were motivated primarily by a drive to maximize their power, except for a single balancer whose aim was to prevent any nation from achieving preponderant power, a balance of power might in fact result. But we have seen that these assumptions are not correct, and since the assumptions of the theory are wrong, the conclusions are also in error.

(Organski 1968, p. 292)

The author's incidental error is that he has compounded a sentence some parts of which are loosely stated assumptions of the theory, and other parts not. His basic error lies in misunderstanding what an assumption is. From previous discussion, we know that assumptions are neither true nor false and that they are essential for the construction of theory. We can freely admit that states are in fact not unitary, purposive actors. States pursue many goals, which are often vaguely formulated and inconsistent. They fluctuate with the changing currents of domestic politics, are prey to the vagaries of a shifting cast of political leaders, and are influenced by the outcomes of bureaucratic struggles. But all of this has always been known, and it tells us nothing about the merits of balance-of-power theory.

A further confusion relates to our second proposition about theory. Balance-of-power theory claims to explain a result (the recurrent formation of balances of power), which may not accord with the intentions of any of the units whose actions combine to produce that result. To contrive and maintain a balance may be the aim of one or more states, but then again it may not be. According to the theory, balances of power tend to form whether some or all states consciously aim to establish and maintain a balance, or whether some or all states aim for universal domination.<sup>3</sup> Yet many, and perhaps most, statements of balance-of-power theory attribute the maintenance of a balance to the separate states as a motive. David

Hume, in his classic essay “Of the Balance of Power,” offers “the maxim of preserving the balance of power” as a constant rule of prudent politics (1742, pp. 142–44). So it may be, but it has proved to be an unfortunately short step from the belief that a high regard for preserving a balance is at the heart of wise statesmanship to the belief that states must follow the maxim if a balance of power is to be maintained. This is apparent in the first of Morgenthau’s four definitions of the term: namely, “a policy aimed at a certain state of affairs.” The reasoning then easily becomes tautological. If a balance of power is to be maintained, the policies of states must aim to uphold it. If a balance of power is in fact maintained, we can conclude that their aim was accurate. If a balance of power is not produced, we can say that the theory’s assumption is erroneous. Finally, and this completes the drift toward the reification of a concept, if the purpose of states is to uphold a balance, the purpose of the balance is “to maintain the stability of the system without destroying the multiplicity of the elements composing it.” Reification has obviously occurred where one reads, for example, of the balance operating “successfully” and of the difficulty that nations have in applying it (1973, pp. 167–74, 202–207).

Reification is often merely the loose use of language or the employment of metaphor to make one’s prose more pleasing. In this case, however, the theory has been drastically distorted, and not only by introducing the notion that if a balance is to be formed, somebody must want it and must work for it. The further distortion of the theory arises when rules are derived from the results of states’ actions and then illogically prescribed to the actors as duties. A possible effect is turned into a necessary cause in the form of a stipulated rule. Thus, it is said, “the balance of power” can “impose its restraints upon the power aspirations of nations” only if they first “restrain themselves by accepting the system of the balance of power as the common framework of their endeavors.” Only if states recognize “the same rules of the game” and play “for the same limited stakes” can the balance of power fulfill “its functions for international stability and national independence” (Morgenthau 1973, pp. 219–20).

The closely related errors that fall under our second proposition about theory are, as we have seen, twin traits of the field of international politics: namely, to assume a necessary correspondence of motive and result and to infer rules for the actors from the observed results of their action. What has gone wrong can be made clear by recalling the economic analogy . . . In a purely competitive economy, everyone’s striving to make a profit drives the profit rate downward. Let the competition continue long enough under static conditions, and everyone’s profit will be zero. To infer from that result that everyone, or anyone, is seeking to minimize profit, and that the competitors must adopt that goal as a rule in order for the system to work, would be absurd. And yet in international politics one frequently finds that rules inferred from the results of the interactions of states are prescribed to the actors and are said to be a condition of the system’s maintenance. Such errors, often made, are also often pointed out, though seemingly to no avail. S. F. Nadel has put the matter simply: “an orderliness abstracted from behaviour cannot guide behaviour” (Nadel 1957, p. 148; cf. Durkheim 1893, pp. 366, 418; Shubik 1959, pp. 11, 32).

Analytic reasoning applied where a systems approach is needed leads to the laying down of all sorts of conditions as prerequisites to balances of power forming and tending toward equilibrium and as general preconditions of world stability and peace. Some require that the number of great powers exceed two; others that a major power be willing to play the role of balancer. Some require that military technology not change radically or rapidly; others that the major states abide by arbitrarily specified rules. But balances of power form in the absence of the “necessary” conditions, and since 1945 the world has been stable, and the world of major powers remarkably peaceful, even though international conditions have not

conformed to theorists' stipulations. Balance-of-power politics prevail wherever two, and only two, requirements are met: that the order be anarchic and that it be populated by units wishing to survive.

For those who believe that if a result is to be produced, someone, or everyone, must want it and must work for it, it follows that explanation turns ultimately on what the separate states are like. If that is true, then theories at the national level, or lower, will sufficiently explain international politics. If, for example, the equilibrium of a balance is maintained through states abiding by rules, then one needs an explanation of how agreement on the rules is achieved and maintained. One does not need a balance-of-power theory, for balances would result from a certain kind of behavior explained perhaps by a theory about national psychology or bureaucratic politics. A balance-of-power theory could not be constructed because it would have nothing to explain. If the good or bad motives of states result in their maintaining balances or disrupting them, then the notion of a balance of power becomes merely a framework organizing one's account of what happened, and that is indeed its customary use. A construction that starts out to be a theory ends up as a set of categories. Categories then multiply rapidly to cover events that the embryo theory had not contemplated. The quest for explanatory power turns into a search for descriptive adequacy.

Finally, and related to our third proposition about theory in general, balance-of-power theory is often criticized because it does not explain the particular policies of states. True, the theory does not tell us why state X made a certain move last Tuesday. To expect it to do so would be like expecting the theory of universal gravitation to explain the wayward path of a falling leaf. A theory at one level of generality cannot answer questions about matters at a different level of generality. Failure to notice this is one error on which the criticism rests. Another is to mistake a theory of international politics for a theory of foreign policy. Confusion about the explanatory claims made by a properly stated balance-of-power theory is rooted in the uncertainty of the distinction drawn between national and international politics or in the denials that the distinction should be made. For those who deny the distinction, for those who devise explanations that are entirely in terms of interacting units, explanations of international politics *are* explanations of foreign policy, and explanations of foreign policy *are* explanations of international politics . . .

Any theory covers some matters and leaves other matters aside. Balance-of-power theory is a theory about the results produced by the uncoordinated actions of states. The theory makes assumptions about the interests and motives of states, rather than explaining them. What it does explain are the constraints that confine all states. The clear perception of constraints provides many clues to the expected reactions of states, but by itself the theory cannot explain those reactions. They depend not only on international constraints but also on the characteristics of states. How will a particular state react? To answer that question we need not only a theory of the market, so to speak, but also a theory about the firms that compose it. What will a state have to react to? Balance-of-power theory can give general and useful answers to that question. The theory explains why a certain similarity of behavior is expected from similarly situated states. The expected behavior is similar, not identical. To explain the expected differences in national responses, a theory would have to show how the different internal structures of states affect their external policies and actions. A theory of foreign policy would not predict the detailed content of policy but instead would lead to different expectations about the tendencies and styles of different countries' policies. Because the national and the international levels are linked, theories of both types, if they are any good, tell us some things, but not the same things, about behavior and outcomes at both levels . . .

### III

. . . Before subjecting a theory to tests, one asks whether the theory is internally consistent and whether it tells us some things of interest that we would not know in its absence . . .

The theory leads us to expect states to behave in ways that result in balances forming. To infer that expectation from the theory is not impressive if balancing is a universal pattern of political behavior, as is sometimes claimed. It is not. Whether political actors balance each other or climb on the bandwagon depends on the system's structure. Political parties, when choosing their presidential candidates, dramatically illustrate both points. When nomination time approaches and no one is established as the party's strong favorite, a number of would-be leaders contend. Some of them form coalitions to check the progress of others. The maneuvering and balancing of would-be leaders when the party lacks one is like the external behavior of states. But this is the pattern only during the leaderless period. As soon as someone looks like the winner, nearly all jump on the bandwagon rather than continuing to build coalitions intended to prevent anyone from winning the prize of power. Bandwagoning, not balancing, becomes the characteristic behavior.<sup>4</sup>

Bandwagoning and balancing behavior are in sharp contrast. Internally, losing candidates throw in their lots with the winner. Everyone wants someone to win; the members of a party want a leader established even while they disagree on who it should be. In a competition for the position of leader, bandwagoning is sensible behavior where gains are possible even for the losers and where losing does not place their security in jeopardy. Externally, states work harder to increase their own strength, or they combine with others, if they are falling behind. In a competition for the position of leader, balancing is sensible behavior where the victory of one coalition over another leaves weaker members of the winning coalition at the mercy of the stronger ones. Nobody wants anyone else to win; none of the great powers wants one of their number to emerge as the leader.

If two coalitions form and one of them weakens, perhaps because of the political disorder of a member, we expect the extent of the other coalition's military preparation to slacken or its unity to lessen. The classic example of the latter effect is the breaking apart of a war-winning coalition in or just after the moment of victory. We do not expect the strong to combine with the strong in order to increase the extent of their power over others, but rather to square off and look for allies who might help them. In anarchy, security is the highest end. Only if survival is assured can states safely seek such other goals as tranquility, profit, and power. Because power is a means and not an end, states prefer to join the weaker of two coalitions. They cannot let power, a possibly useful means, become the end they pursue. The goal the system encourages them to seek is security. Increased power may or may not serve that end. Given two coalitions, for example, the greater success of one in drawing members to it may tempt the other to risk preventive war, hoping for victory through surprise before disparities widen. If states wished to maximize power, they would join the stronger side, and we would see not balances forming but a world hegemony forged. This does not happen because balancing, not bandwagoning, is the behavior induced by the system. The first concern of states is not to maximize power but to maintain their positions in the system . . .

The theory depicts international politics as a competitive realm. Do states develop the characteristics that competitors are expected to display? The question poses another test for the theory. The fate of each state depends on its responses to what other states do. The possibility that conflict will be conducted by force leads to competition in the arts and the instruments of force. Competition produces a tendency toward the sameness of the competitors. Thus Bismarck's startling victories over Austria in 1866 and over France in 1870



quickly led the major continental powers (and Japan) to imitate the Prussian military staff system, and the failure of Britain and the United States to follow the pattern simply indicated that they were outside the immediate arena of competition. Contending states imitate the military innovations contrived by the country of greatest capability and ingenuity. And so the weapons of major contenders, and even their strategies, begin to look much the same all over the world. Thus at the turn of the century Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz argued successfully for building a battleship fleet on the grounds that Germany could challenge Britain [*sic*] at sea only with a naval doctrine and weapons similar to hers (Art 1973, p. 16).

The effects of competition are not confined narrowly to the military realm. Socialization to the system should also occur. Does it? Again, because we can almost always find confirming examples if we look hard, we try to find cases that are unlikely to lend credence to the theory. One should look for instances of states conforming to common international practices even though for internal reasons they would prefer not to. The behavior of the Soviet Union in its early years is one such instance. The Bolsheviks in the early years of their power preached international revolution and flouted the conventions of diplomacy. They were saying, in effect, "we will not be socialized to this system." The attitude was well expressed by Trotsky, who, when asked what he would do as foreign minister, replied, "I will issue some revolutionary proclamations to the peoples and then close up the joint" (quoted in Von Laue 1963, p. 235). In a competitive arena, however, one party may need the assistance of others. Refusal to play the political game may risk one's own destruction. The pressures of competition were rapidly felt and reflected in the Soviet Union's diplomacy. Thus Lenin, sending foreign minister Chicherin to the Genoa Conference of 1922, bade him farewell with this caution: "Avoid big words" (quoted in Moore 1950, p. 204). Chicherin, who personified the carefully tailored traditional diplomat rather than the simply uniformed revolutionary, was to refrain from inflammatory rhetoric for the sake of working deals. These he successfully completed with that other pariah power and ideological enemy, Germany.

The close juxtaposition of states promotes their sameness through the disadvantages that arise from a failure to conform to successful practices. It is this "sameness," an effect of the system, that is so often attributed to the acceptance of so-called rules of state behavior. Chiliastic rulers occasionally come to power. In power, most of them quickly change their ways. They can refuse to do so, and yet hope to survive, only if they rule countries little affected by the competition of states. The socialization of nonconformist states proceeds at a pace that is set by the extent of their involvement in the system. And that is another testable statement.

The theory leads to many expectations about behaviors and outcomes. From the theory, one predicts that states will engage in balancing behavior, whether or not balanced power is the end of their acts. From the theory, one predicts a strong tendency toward balance in the system. The expectation is not that a balance, once achieved, will be maintained, but that a balance, once disrupted, will be restored in one way or another. Balances of power recurrently form. Since the theory depicts international politics as a competitive system, one predicts more specifically that states will display characteristics common to competitors: namely, that they will imitate each other and become socialized to their system . . .

## Notes

- 1 Put differently, states face a "prisoners' dilemma." If each of two parties follows his own interest, both end up worse off than if each acted to achieve joint interests. For thorough examination of the logic of such situations, see Snyder and Diesing 1977; for brief and suggestive international applications, see Jervis, January 1978.



- 2 Along with the explication of balance-of-power theory in the pages that follow, the reader may wish to consult a historical study of balance-of-power politics in practice. The best brief work is Wight (1973).
- 3 Looking at states over a wide span of time and space, Dowty concludes that in no case were shifts in alliances produced “by considerations of an overall balance of power” (1969, p. 95).
- 4 Stephen Van Evera suggested using “bandwagoning” to serve as the opposite of “balancing.”

## References

- Art, Robert J. (1973). “The influence of foreign policy on seapower: new weapons and Weltpolitik in Wilhelminian Germany.” *Sage Professional Paper in International Studies*, vol. 2. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.
- Ashby, W. Ross (1956). *An Introduction to Cybernetics*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1964.
- Dowty, Alan (1969). “Conflict in war potential politics: an approach to historical macroanalysis.” *Peace Research Society Papers*, vol. 13.
- Dukheim, Emile (1893). *The Division of Labor in Society*. Translated by George Simpson, 1933. New York: Free Press, 1964.
- Fortes, Meyer (1949). “Time and social structure: an Ashanti case study.” In Fortes (ed.), *Social Structure: Studies Presented to A. R. Radcliffe-Brown*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Fox, William T. R. (1959). “The uses of international relations theory.” In Fox (ed.), *Theoretical Aspects of International Relations*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Haas, Ernst B. (July 1953). “The balance of power: prescription, concept, or propaganda?” *World Politics*, vol. 5.
- Hosoya, Chihiro (April 1974). “Characteristics of the foreign policy decision-making system in Japan.” *World Politics*, vol. 26.
- Hume, David (1742). “Of the balance of power.” In Charles W. Hendel (ed.), *David Hume’s Political Essays*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953.
- Jervis, Robert (January 1978). “Cooperation under the security dilemma.” *World Politics*, vol. 30.
- Johnson, Chalmers A. (1966). *Revolutionary Change*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Katona, George (September 1953). “Rational behavior and economic behavior.” *Psychological Review*, vol. 60.
- Livernash, E. R. (1963). “The relation of power to the structure and process of collective bargaining.” In Bruce M. Russett (ed.), *Economic Theories of International Politics*. Chicago: Markham, 1968.
- Martineau, Harriet (1853). *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte: Freely Translated and Condensed*, 3rd ed., vol. 2. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1893.
- Moore, Barrington, Jr. (1950). *Soviet Politics: The Dilemma of Power*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Morgenthau, Hans J. (1973). *Politics Among Nations*, 5th ed. New York: Knopf.
- Nadel, S. F. (1957). *The Theory of Social Structure*. Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press.
- Organski, A. F. K. (1968). *World Politics*, 2nd ed. New York: Knopf.
- Shubik, Martin (1959). *Strategy and Market Structure*. New York: Wiley.
- Snyder, Glenn H. and Paul Diesing (1977). *Conflict among Nations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Sterling, Richard W. (1974). *Macropolitics: International Relations in a Global Society*. New York: Knopf.
- Von Laue, Theodore H. (1963). “Soviet diplomacy: G.V. Chicherin, People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs 1918–1930.” In Gordon A. Craig and Felix Gilbert (eds.), *The Diplomats 1919–1939*, vol. 1. New York: Atheneum.
- Wight, Martin (1966). “The balance of power.” In H. Butterfield and Martin Wight (eds.), *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- (1973). “The balance of power and international order.” In Alan James (ed.), *The Bases of International Order*. London: Oxford University Press.

# Realist thought and neorealist theory

*Kenneth N. Waltz*

From: *Journal of International Affairs* 44, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1990): 21–37.

## International politics: within the theoretical pale

The new realism, in contrast to the old, begins by proposing a solution to the problem of distinguishing factors internal to international political systems from those that are external. Theory isolates one realm from others in order to deal with it intellectually. By depicting an international political system as a whole, with structural and unit levels at once distinct and connected, neorealism establishes the autonomy of international politics and thus makes a theory about it possible.<sup>1</sup> Neorealism develops the concept of a system's structure which at once bounds the domain that students of international politics deal with and enables them to see how the structure of the system, and variations in it, affect the interacting units and the outcomes they produce. International structure emerges from the interaction of states and then constrains them from taking certain actions while propelling them toward others.

The concept of structure is based on the fact that units differently juxtaposed and combined behave differently and in interacting produce different outcomes. International structures are defined, first, by the ordering principle of the system, in our case anarchy, and second, by the distribution of capabilities across units. In an anarchic realm, structures are defined in terms of their major units. International structures vary with significant changes in the number of great powers. Great powers are marked off from others by the combined capabilities (or power) they command. When their number changes consequentially, the calculations and behaviors of states, and the outcomes their interactions produce, vary.

The idea that international politics can be thought of as a system with a precisely defined structure is neorealism's fundamental departure from traditional realism . . .

. . . Neorealism departs from traditional realism in the following additional ways: Neorealism produces a shift in causal relations, offers a different interpretation of power, and treats the unit level differently.

## Theory and reality

### *Causal directions*

Constructing theories according to different suppositions alters the appearance of whole fields of inquiry. A new theory draws attention to new objects of inquiry, interchanges causes and effects, and addresses different worlds. When John Hobson cast economics in macrotheoretical terms, he baffled his fellow economists. The London Extension Board would not allow him to offer courses on political economy because an economics professor

who had read Hobson's book thought it "equivalent in rationality to an attempt to prove the flatness of the earth."<sup>22</sup> Hobson's figure was apt. Microtheory, the economic orthodoxy of the day, portrayed a world different from the one that Hobson's macrotheory revealed.

Similarly, the neorealist's world looks different from the one that earlier realists had portrayed. For realists, the world addressed is one of interacting states. For neorealists, interacting states can be adequately studied only by distinguishing between structural and unit-level causes and effects. Structure becomes a new object of inquiry, as well as an occasion for argument. In the light of neorealist theory, means and ends are differently viewed, as are causes and effects. Realists think of causes running in one direction, from interacting states to the outcomes their acts and interactions produce. This is clearly seen in Morgenthau's "Six Principles of Political Realism," which form the substance of a chapter headed "A Realist Theory of International Politics."<sup>23</sup> Strikingly, one finds much said about foreign policy and little about international politics. The principles develop as Morgenthau searches for his well-known "rational outline, a map that suggests to us the possible meanings of foreign policy."<sup>24</sup> The principles are about human nature, about interest and power, and about questions of morality. Political realism offers the perspective in which the actions of statesmen are to be understood and judged. Morgenthau's work was in harmony with the developing political science of his day, although at the time this was not seen. Methodological presuppositions shape the conduct of inquiry. The political-science paradigm was becoming deeply entrenched. Its logic is preeminently behavioral. The established paradigm of any field indicates what facts to scrutinize and how they are interconnected. Behavioral logic explains political outcomes through examining the constituent parts of political systems. When Aron and other traditionalists insist that theorists' categories be consonant with actors' motives and perceptions, they are affirming the preeminently behavioral logic that their inquiries follow.<sup>5</sup> The characteristics and the interactions of behavioral units are taken to be the direct causes of political events, whether in the study of national or of international politics. Aron, Morgenthau and other realists tried to understand and explain international outcomes by examining the actions and interactions of the units, the states that populate the international arena and those who guide their policies. Realism's approach is primarily inductive. Neorealism is more heavily deductive . . .

Neorealism contends that international politics can be understood only if the effects of structure are added to traditional realism's unit-level explanations. More generally, neorealism reconceives the causal link between interacting units and international outcomes. Neorealist theory shows that causes run not in one direction, from interacting units to outcomes produced, but rather in two directions. One must believe that some causes of international outcomes are located at the level of the interacting units. Since variations in unit-level causes do not correspond to variations in observed outcomes, one has to believe that some causes are located at the structural level of international politics as well. Realists cannot handle causation at a level above states because they fail to conceive of structure as a force that shapes and shoves the units. Causes at the level of units interact with those at the level of the structure and because they do so explanation at the level of units alone is bound to mislead. If one's theory allows for the handling of both unit-level and structure-level causes, then it can cope with both the changes and the continuities that occur in a system.

***Power as means and end***

For many realists, the desire for power is rooted in the nature of man. Morgenthau recognized that given competition for scarce goods with no one to serve as arbiter, a struggle for power will ensue among the competitors, and that consequently the struggle for power can be explained without reference to the evil born in men. The struggle for power arises because people want things and not necessarily because of the evil in their desires. This he labels one of the two roots of conflict, but even while discussing it he pulls toward the “other root of conflict and concomitant evil”—the *animus dominandi*, the desire for power. He often considers man’s drive for power as a datum more basic than the chance conditions under which struggles for power occur.<sup>6</sup>

The reasoning is faithful to Hobbes for whom the three causes of quarrels were competition, diffidence (i.e., distrust), and glory. Competition leads to fighting for gain, diffidence to fighting to keep what has been gained, glory to fighting for reputation. Because some hunger for power, it behooves others to cultivate their appetites.<sup>7</sup> For Morgenthau, as for Hobbes, even if one has plenty of power and is secure in its possession, more power is nevertheless wanted. As Morgenthau put it:

Since the desire to attain a maximum of power is universal, all nations must always be afraid that their own miscalculations and the power increases of other nations might add up to an inferiority for themselves which they must at all costs try to avoid.<sup>8</sup>

Both Hobbes and Morgenthau see that conflict is in part situationally explained, but both believe that even were it not so, pride, lust, and the quest for glory would cause the war of all against all to continue indefinitely. Ultimately, conflict and war are rooted in human nature.

The preoccupation with the qualities of man is understandable in view of the purposes Hobbes and Morgenthau entertain. Both are interested in understanding the state. Hobbes seeks a logical explanation of its emergence; Morgenthau seeks to explain how it behaves internationally. Morgenthau thought of the “rational” statesman as striving ever to accumulate more and more power. Power is seen as an end in itself. Nations at times may act aside from considerations of power. When they do, Morgenthau insists, their actions are not “of a political nature.”<sup>9</sup> The claim that “the desire to attain a maximum of power is universal” among nations is one of Morgenthau’s “objective laws that have their roots in human nature.”<sup>10</sup> Yet much of the behavior of nations contradicts it. Morgenthau does not explain why other desires fail to moderate or outweigh the fear states may have about miscalculation of their relative power. His opinions about power are congenial to realism. They are easily slipped into because the effort to explain behavior and outcomes by the characteristics of units leads realists to assign to them attributes that seem to accord with behavior and outcomes observed. Unable to conceive of international politics as a self-sustaining system, realists concentrate on the behavior and outcomes that seem to follow from the characteristics they have attributed to men and states. Neorealists, rather than viewing power as an end in itself, see power as a possibly useful means, with states running risks if they have either too little or too much of it. Weakness may invite an attack that greater strength would dissuade an adversary from launching. Excessive strength may prompt other states to increase their arms and pool their efforts. Power is a possibly useful means, and sensible statesmen try to have an appropriate amount of it. In crucial situations, the ultimate concern of states is not for power but for security. This is an important revision of realist theory.

A still more important one is neorealism's use of the concept of power as a defining characteristic of structure. Power in neorealist theory is simply the combined capability of a state. Its distribution across states, and changes in that distribution, help to define structures and changes in them as explained above. Some complaints have been made about the absence of efforts on the part of neorealists to devise objective measures of power. Whatever the difficulties of measurement may be, they are not theoretical difficulties but practical ones encountered when moving from theory to its practical application.

### ***Interacting units***

For realists, anarchy is a general condition rather than a distinct structure. Anarchy sets the problem that states have to cope with. Once this is understood, the emphasis of realists shifts to the interacting units. States are unlike one another in form of government, character of rulers, types of ideology, and in many other ways. For both realists and neorealists, differently constituted states behave differently and produce different outcomes. For neorealists, however, states are made functionally similar by the constraints of structure, with the principal differences among them defined according to capabilities. For neorealists, moreover, structure mediates the outcomes that states produce. As internal and external circumstances change, structures and states may bear more or less causal weight. The question of the relative importance of different levels cannot be abstractly or definitively answered. Ambiguity cannot be resolved since structures affect units even as units affect structures. Some have thought that this is a defect of neorealist theory. It is so, however, only if factors at the unit level or at the structural level determine, rather than merely affect, outcomes. Theories cannot remove the uncertainty of politics, but only help us to comprehend it.

Neorealists concentrate their attention on the central, previously unanswered question in the study of international politics: How can the structure of an international-political system be distinguished from its interacting parts? Once that question is answered, attention shifts to the effects of structure on interacting units. Theorists concerned with structural explanations need not ask how variations in units affect outcomes, even though outcomes find their causes at both structural and unit levels. Neorealists see states as like units; each state "is like all other states in being an autonomous political unit." Autonomy is the unit-level counterpart of anarchy at the structural level.<sup>11</sup> A theory of international politics can leave aside variation in the composition of states and in the resources and technology they command because the logic of anarchy does not vary with its content. Realists concentrate on the heterogeneity of states because they believe that differences of behavior and outcomes proceed directly from differences in the composition of units. Noticing that the proposition is faulty, neorealists offer a theory that explains how structures affect behavior and outcomes.

The logic of anarchy obtains whether the system is composed of tribes, nations, oligopolistic firms, or street gangs. Yet systems populated by units of different sorts in some ways perform differently, even though they share the same organizing principle. More needs to be said about the status and role of units in neorealist theory. More also needs to be said about changes in the background conditions against which states operate. Changes in the industrial and military technologies available to states, for example, may change the character of systems but do not change the theory by which their operation is explained. These are subjects for another essay. Here I have been concerned not to deny the many connections between the old and the new realism but to emphasize the most important theoretical changes that neorealism has wrought. I have been all the more concerned to do

this since the influence of realist and behavioral logic lingers in the study of international politics, as in political science generally.

## Notes

- 1 Neorealism is sometimes referred to as structural realism. Throughout this essay I refer to my own formulation of neorealist theory. See esp. chs. 5–6 of *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).
- 2 John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money* (London: Macmillan, 1951) pp. 365–6.
- 3 Morgenthau, [*Politics Among Nations*, 5th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972)], pp. 4–14.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.5.
- 5 See Waltz (1979), *op. cit.*, pp. 44, 47, 62.
- 6 Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), p. 192.
- 7 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*.
- 8 Morgenthau (1972), *op. cit.*, p. 208.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 On page 95 of *Theory of International Politics*, I slipped into using “sovereignty” for “autonomy.” Sovereignty, Ruggie points out, is particular to the modern state. See his “Continuity and Transformation,” in Keohane, ed., [*Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986)], pp. 142–148.



# The origins of war in neorealist theory

*Kenneth N. Waltz*

From: *The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988): 39–52. (Note: this selection was originally published in the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18, no. 4 (Spring 1988): 615–28.)

Like most historians, many students of international politics have been skeptical about the possibility of creating a theory that might help one to understand and explain the international events that interest us. Thus Morgenthau, foremost among traditional realists, was fond of repeating Blaise Pascal's remark that "the history of the world would have been different had Cleopatra's nose been a bit shorter" and then asking "How do you systemize that?"<sup>1</sup> His appreciation of the role of the accidental and the occurrence of the unexpected in politics dampened his theoretical ambition.

The response of neorealists is that, although difficulties abound, some of the obstacles that seem most daunting lie in misapprehensions about theory. Theory obviously cannot explain the accidental or account for unexpected events; it deals in regularities and repetitions and is possible only if these can be identified. A further difficulty is found in the failure of realists to conceive of international politics as a distinct domain about which theories can be fashioned. Morgenthau, for example, insisted on "the autonomy of politics," but he failed to apply the concept to international politics. A theory is a depiction of the organization of a domain and of the connections among its parts. A theory indicates that some factors are more important than others and specifies relations among them. In reality, everything is related to everything else, and one domain cannot be separated from others. But theory isolates one realm from all others in order to deal with it intellectually. By defining the structure of international political systems, neorealism establishes the autonomy of international politics and thus makes a theory about it possible . . .<sup>2</sup>

Neorealism contends that international politics can be understood only if the effects of structure are added to the unit-level explanations of traditional realism. By emphasizing how structures affect actions and outcomes, neorealism rejects the assumption that man's innate lust for power constitutes a sufficient cause of war in the absence of any other. It reconceives the causal link between interacting units and international outcomes. According to the logic of international politics, one must believe that some causes of international outcomes are the result of interactions at the unit level, and, since variations in presumed causes do not correspond very closely to variations in observed outcomes, one must also assume that others are located at the structural level. Causes at the level of units interact with those at the level of structure, and, because they do so, explanation at the unit level alone is bound to be misleading. If an approach allows the consideration of both unit-level and structural-level causes, then it can cope with both the changes and the continuities that occur in a system.

Structural realism presents a systemic portrait of international politics depicting component units according to the manner of their arrangement. For the purpose of

developing a theory, states are cast as unitary actors wanting at least to survive, and are taken to be the system's constituent units. The essential structural quality of the system is anarchy—the absence of a central monopoly of legitimate force. Changes of structure and hence of system occur with variations in the number of great powers. The range of expected outcomes is inferred from the assumed motivation of the units and the structure of the system in which they act.

A systems theory of international politics deals with forces at the international, and not at the national, level. With both systems-level and unit-level forces in play, how can one construct a theory of international politics without simultaneously constructing a theory of foreign policy? An international-political theory does not imply or require a theory of foreign policy any more than a market theory implies or requires a theory of the firm. Systems theories, whether political or economic, are theories that explain how the organization of a realm acts as a constraining and disposing force on the interacting units within it. Such theories tell us about the forces to which the units are subjected. From them, we can draw some inferences about the expected behavior and fate of the units: namely, how they will have to compete with and adjust to one another if they are to survive and flourish. To the extent that the dynamics of a system limit the freedom of its units, their behavior and the outcomes of their behavior become predictable. How do we expect firms to respond to differently structured markets, and states to differently structured international-political systems? These theoretical questions require us to take firms as firms, and states as states, without paying attention to differences among them. The questions are then answered by reference to the placement of the units in their system and not by reference to the internal qualities of the units. Systems theories explain why different units behave similarly and, despite their variations, produce outcomes that fall within expected ranges. Conversely, theories at the unit level tell us why different units behave differently despite their similar placement in a system. A theory about foreign policy is a theory at the national level. It leads to expectations about the responses that dissimilar polities will make to external pressures. A theory of international politics bears on the foreign policies of nations although it claims to explain only certain aspects of them. It can tell us what international conditions national policies have to cope with.

From the vantage point of neorealist theory, competition and conflict among states stem directly from the twin facts of life under conditions of anarchy: States in an anarchic order must provide for their own security, and threats or seeming threats to their security abound. Preoccupation with identifying dangers and counteracting them become a way of life. Relations remain tense; the actors are usually suspicious and often hostile even though by nature they may not be given to suspicion and hostility. Individually, states may only be doing what they can to bolster their security. Their individual intentions aside, collectively their actions yield arms races and alliances. The uneasy state of affairs is exacerbated by the familiar "security dilemma," wherein measures that enhance one state's security typically diminish that of others.<sup>3</sup> In an anarchic domain, the source of one's own comfort is the source of another's worry. Hence a state that is amassing instruments of war, even for its own defensive, is cast by others as a threat requiring response. The response itself then serves to confirm the first state's belief that it had reason to worry. Similarly an alliance that in the interest of defense moves to increase cohesion among its members and add to its ranks inadvertently imperils an opposing alliance and provokes countermeasures.

Some states may hunger for power for power's sake. Neorealist theory, however, shows

that it is not necessary to assume an innate lust for power in order to account for the sometimes fierce competition that marks the international arena. In an anarchic domain, a state of war exists if all parties lust for power. But so too will a state of war exist if all states seek only to ensure their own safety.

Although neorealist theory does not explain why particular wars are fought, it does explain war's dismal recurrence through the millennia. Neorealists point not to the ambitions or the intrigues that punctuate the outbreak of individual conflicts but instead to the existing structure within which events, whether by design or accident, can precipitate open clashes of arms. The origins of hot wars lie in cold wars, and the origins of cold wars are found in the anarchic ordering of the international arena.

The recurrence of war is explained by the structure of the international system. Theorists explain what historians know: War is normal. Any given war is explained not by looking at the structure of the international-political system but by looking at the particularities within it: the situations, the characters, and the interactions of states. Although particular explanations are found at the unit level, general explanations are also needed. Wars vary in frequency, and in other ways as well. A central question for a structural theory is this: How do changes of the system affect the expected frequency of war?

### **Keeping wars cold: the structural level**

In an anarchic realm, peace is fragile. The prolongation of peace requires that potentially destabilizing developments elicit the interest and the calculated response of some or all of the system's principal actors. In the anarchy of states, the price of inattention or miscalculation is often paid in blood. An important issue for a structural theory to address is whether destabilizing conditions and events are managed better in multipolar or bipolar systems.

In a system of, say, five great powers, the politics of power turns on the diplomacy by which alliances are made, maintained, and disrupted. Flexibility of alignment means both that the country one is wooing may prefer another suitor and that one's present alliance partner may defect. Flexibility of alignment limits a state's options because, ideally, its strategy must please potential allies and satisfy present partners. Alliances are made by states that have some but not all of their interests in common. The common interest is ordinarily a negative one: fear of other states. Divergence comes when positive interests are at issue. In alliances among near equals, strategies are always the product of compromise since the interests of allies and their notions of how to secure them are never identical.

If competing blocs are seen to be closely balanced, and if competition turns on important matters, then to let one's side down risks one's own destruction. In a moment of crisis the weaker or the more adventurous party is likely to determine its side's policy. Its partners can afford neither to let the weaker member be defeated nor to advertise their disunity by failing to back a venture even while deploring its risks . . .

In a two-power competition, a loss for one is easily taken to be a gain for the other. As a result, the powers in a bipolar world promptly respond to unsettling events. In a multipolar world, dangers are diffused, responsibilities unclear, and definitions of vital interests easily obscured. Where a number of states are in balance, the skillful foreign policy of a forward power is designed to gain an advantage without antagonizing other states and frightening them into united action. At times in modern Europe, the benefits of possible

gains have seemed to outweigh the risks of likely losses. Statesmen have hoped to push an issue to the limit without causing all of the potential opponents to unite. When there are several possible enemies, unity of action among them is difficult to achieve. National leaders could therefore think—or desperately hope, as did Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg and Adolf Hitler before two world wars—that a united opposition would not form. If interests and ambitions conflict, the absence of crises is more worrisome than their presence. Crises are produced by the determination of a state to resist a change that another state tries to make. As the leaders in a bipolar system, the United States and the Soviet Union are disposed to do the resisting, for in important matters they cannot hope that their allies will do it for them. Political action in the postwar world has reflected this condition. Communist guerrillas operating in Greece prompted the Truman Doctrine. The tightening of Soviet control over the states of Eastern Europe led to the Marshall Plan and the Atlantic Defense Treaty, and these in turn gave rise to the Cominform and the Warsaw Pact. The plan to create a West German government produced the Berlin blockade. During the past four decades, our responses have been geared to the Soviet Union's actions, and theirs to ours.

Miscalculation by some or all of the great powers is a source of danger in a multipolar world; overreaction by either or both of the great powers is a source of danger in a bipolar world. Which is worse: miscalculation or overreaction? Miscalculation is the greater evil because it is more likely to permit an unfolding of events that finally threatens the status quo and brings the powers to war. Overreaction is the lesser evil because at worst it costs only money for unnecessary arms and possibly the fighting of limited wars. The dynamics of a bipolar system, moreover, provide a measure of correction. In a world in which two states, united in their mutual antagonism overshadow any others, the benefits of a calculated response stand out most clearly, and the sanctions against irresponsible behavior achieve their greatest force. Thus two states, isolationist by tradition, untutored in the ways of international politics, and famed for impulsive behavior, have shown themselves—not always and everywhere, but always in crucial cases—to be wary, alert, cautious, flexible, and forbearing. Moreover, the economies of the great powers in a bipolar world are less interdependent than those of the great powers of a multipolar one. The size of great powers tends to increase as their numbers fall, and the larger a state is, the greater the variety of its resources. States of continental size do proportionately less of their business abroad than, for example, Britain, France, and Germany did in their heydays. Never before in modern history have the great powers depended so little on the outside world, and been so uninvolved in one another's economic affairs, as the United States and the Soviet Union have been since the war. The separation of their interests reduces the occasions for dispute and permits them, if they wish, to leave each other alone even though each defines its security interests largely in terms of the other.

Interdependence of parties, diffusion of dangers, confusion of responses: These are the characteristics of great-power politics in a multipolar world. Self-dependence of parties, clarity of dangers, certainty about who has to face them: These are the characteristics of great-power politics in a bipolar world . . .

## Notes

- 1 Hans J. Morgenthau. "International Relations: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches," in Norman D. Palmer (ed.). *A Design for International Relations Research: Scope, Theory, Methods, and Relevance* (Philadelphia, 1970), 78.

- 2 Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (New York, 1973; 5th ed.), 11. Ludwig Boltzman (trans. Rudolf Weingartner). "Theories as Representations," excerpted in Arthur Danto and Sidney Morgenbesser (eds.), *Philosophy of Science* (Cleveland, 1960), 245–252. Neorealism is sometimes dubbed structural realism. I use the terms interchangeably and, throughout this article, refer to my own formulation of neorealist theory. See Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass., 1979); Robert Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York, 1986).
- 3 See John H. Herz, "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, II (1950), 157–180.

## 5 Defensive structural realism

Defensive structural realism is a direct descendant of Waltz's neorealism. Defensive structural realism shares neorealism's focus on structure as a key causal variable, as well as its assumption that states seek security rather than power. However, while Waltz is steadfastly agnostic about which microfoundation underpins neorealism (variously invoking rationality, socialization, and selection) defensive structural realists have focused almost exclusively on rationality.

Defensive structural realists have also been more willing to add variables to their theories in order to obtain greater explanatory leverage. In particular, defensive structural realists have incorporated the security dilemma and offense–defense variables (especially technology and geography) into their theories. Combined with rationality, this has allowed the research program to move beyond the broad-level predictions that Waltz makes about international outcomes, and to make more fine-grained explanations of foreign policy. For example, with the addition of the offense–defense balance, defensive structural realists have produced a rich literature on the causes of particular great power wars.

The reading selections included in this chapter describe several of these aspects of defensive structural realism. Although it predates the main body of the research program, we include Robert Jervis' groundbreaking "Cooperation under the security dilemma." Given the centrality of the security dilemma and offense–defense variables in defensive structural realism, the article has been key to the development of the research program. Jervis introduces the concept of the offense–defense balance and shows how technology and geography work to tip the balance in favor of one side or the other. As Jervis explains, whether the offense or the defense has the advantage has tremendous implications for the severity of the security dilemma and the prospects for international peace. When defense has the advantage, security is plentiful. When offense has the advantage, security is scarce. The other major variable in Jervis' discussion is offense–defense differentiation, since a clear distinction between offensive and defensive capabilities ameliorates the security dilemma.

Stephen Walt's "Alliance formation and the balance of world power" explains why states form alliances. Walt argues that states align against threats, not power. Walt treats threat as a composite variable, consisting of aggregate material capabilities, intentions, and two offense–defense variables: offensive capabilities and proximity. Walt's theory is dyadic, since his conceptualization of threat only makes sense in the context of the external problems posed by one specific challenger to another. The excerpt in the chapter also includes a discussion of why balancing against threat is more common than bandwagoning, i.e. why states usually choose to ally against, rather than with, the threatening state.

The short selection from Steven Van Evera's *Causes of War* summarizes his hypotheses about the impact of the character and distribution of national power in the international



system. As with Walt's balance of threat theory, the offense–defense balance plays a central role in Van Evera's discussion of the causes of major power war. Van Evera discusses how perceptions (and, more unfortunately, misperceptions) of the “fine-grained structure of power” impact the decisions that lead to war. Van Evera's treatment of structure includes such factors as first-move advantages, offense dominance, and windows of opportunity. Van Evera notes that, while these war-provoking circumstances are rare, decision-makers often misperceive their presence and as a result adopt bellicose policies.

In “Realists as optimists: Cooperation as self-help,” Charles Glaser also focuses on aspects of what Van Evera labels fine-grained aspects of structure. Focusing on military capability rather than power, Glaser suggests that standard structural realist accounts overstate the benefits of adopting competitive policies, and mistakenly advise against cooperative policies. While agreeing that states must rely on self-help, Glaser notes that cooperative policies are often more effective at increasing a state's security than competitive ones. Using offense–defense variables, Glaser shows how states can signal their benign intentions in order to reduce the pernicious effects of the security dilemma and reach cooperative agreements. Of all defensive structural realists, Glaser is perhaps the most outspoken on the extent to which structure is benign, and hence the causes of war must lie elsewhere.

Evan Braden Montgomery's “Breaking out of the security dilemma” addresses the puzzle of why states rarely seem to follow the kinds of signaling strategies recommended by Glaser and other defensive structural realists. If the security dilemma is exacerbated by hardline policies, why do states not reassure their neighbors and interrupt the dynamic? Montgomery notes that states rarely adopt the types of policies that persuade others of their peaceful intentions. Montgomery insists that states avoid reductions in offensive forces and other reassuring policies for fear that they may become vulnerable to an attack. Like Waltz, Montgomery sees little opportunity for cooperation in a self-help world.

Although sometimes included in the same group as neorealism, defensive structural realism is better considered as a separate research program. Its exclusive use of rationality, the addition of offense–defense variables, and the willingness to address foreign policy choices rather than only international political outcomes mark it as a distinct research program. To be sure, defensive structural realism shares neorealism's difficulty explaining why states embark on self-defeating paths to war. But defensive structural realism's lacuna is considerably amplified by the expectation that offense–defense variables usually favor the defense. The security dilemma notwithstanding, defensive structural realists are much better at explaining how to cope with aggression than they are at showing where that aggression comes from. Since structure by itself seems unable to explain war, defensive structural realism often provides the starting point for neoclassical realist analyses (see Chapter 8). With its systematization of non-structural factors, neoclassical realism directly addresses the question of why actors faced with a benign structure nevertheless behave badly.

# Cooperation under the security dilemma

*Robert Jervis*

From: *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978): 167–214.

## **I. Anarchy and the security dilemma**

The lack of an international sovereign not only permits wars to occur, but also makes it difficult for states that are satisfied with the status quo to arrive at goals that they recognize as being in their common interest. Because there are no institutions or authorities that can make and enforce international laws, the policies of cooperation that will bring mutual rewards if others cooperate may bring disaster if they do not. Because states are aware of this, anarchy encourages behavior that leaves all concerned worse off than they could be, even in the extreme case in which all states would like to freeze the status quo . . .

## **II. What makes cooperation more likely?**

Given this gloomy picture, the obvious question is, why are we not all dead? Or, to put it less starkly, what kinds of variables ameliorate the impact of anarchy and the security dilemma? . . .

## **III. Offense, defense, and the security dilemma**

[One] approach starts with the central point of the security dilemma—that an increase in one state's security decreases the security of others—and examines the conditions under which this proposition holds. Two crucial variables are involved: whether defensive weapons and policies can be distinguished from offensive ones, and whether the defense or the offense has the advantage. The definitions are not always clear, and many cases are difficult to judge, but these two variables shed a great deal of light on the question of whether status-quo powers will adopt compatible security policies. All the variables discussed so far leave the heart of the problem untouched. But when defensive weapons differ from offensive ones, it is possible for a state to make itself more secure without making others less secure. And when the defense has the advantage over the offense, a large increase in one state's security only slightly decreases the security of the others, and status-quo powers can all enjoy a high level of security and largely escape from the state of nature.

***Offense–defense balance***

When we say that the offense has the advantage, we simply mean that it is easier to destroy the other's army and take its territory than it is to defend one's own. When the defense has the advantage, it is easier to protect and to hold than it is to move forward, destroy, and take. If effective defenses can be erected quickly, an attacker may be able to keep territory he has taken in an initial victory. Thus, the dominance of the defense made it very hard for Britain and France to push Germany out of France in World War I. But when superior defenses are difficult for an aggressor to improvise on the battlefield and must be constructed during peacetime, they provide no direct assistance to him.

The security dilemma is at its most vicious when commitments, strategy, or technology dictate that the only route to security lies through expansion. Status-quo powers must then act like aggressors; the fact that they would gladly agree to forego the opportunity for expansion in return for guarantees for their security has no implications for their behavior. Even if expansion is not sought as a goal in itself, there will be quick and drastic changes in the distribution of territory and in influence. Conversely, when the defense has the advantage, status-quo states can make themselves more secure without gravely endangering others.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, if the defense has enough of an advantage and if the states are of roughly equal size, not only will the security dilemma cease to inhibit status-quo states from cooperating, but aggression will be next to impossible, thus rendering international anarchy relatively unimportant. If states cannot conquer each other, then the lack of sovereignty, although it presents problems of collective goods in a number of areas, no longer forces states to devote their primary attention to self-preservation. Although, if force were not usable, there would be fewer restraints on the use of nonmilitary instruments, these are rarely powerful enough to threaten the vital interests of a major state.

Two questions of the offense–defense balance can be separated. First, does the state have to spend more or less than one dollar on defensive forces to offset each dollar spent by the other side on forces that could be used to attack? If the state has one dollar to spend on increasing its security, should it put it into offensive or defensive forces? Second, with a given inventory of forces, is it better to attack or to defend? Is there an incentive to strike first or to absorb the other's blow? These two aspects are often linked: if each dollar spent on offense can overcome each dollar spent on defense, and if both sides have the same defense budgets, then both are likely to build offensive forces and find it attractive to attack rather than to wait for the adversary to strike.

These aspects affect the security dilemma in different ways. The first has its greatest impact on arms races. If the defense has the advantage, and if the status-quo powers have reasonable subjective security requirements, they can probably avoid an arms race. Although an increase in one side's arms and security will still decrease the other's security, the former's increase will be larger than the latter's decrease. So if one side increases its arms, the other can bring its security back up to its previous level by adding a smaller amount to its forces. And if the first side reacts to this change, its increase will also be smaller than the stimulus that produced it. Thus a stable equilibrium will be reached. Shifting from dynamics to statics, each side can be quite secure with forces roughly equal to those of the other. Indeed, if the defense is much more potent than the offense, each side can be willing to have forces much smaller than the other's, and can be indifferent to a wide range of the other's defense policies.

The second aspect—whether it is better to attack or to defend—influences short-run stability. When the offense has the advantage, a state's reaction to international tension will increase the chances of war. The incentives for pre-emption and the “reciprocal fear of

surprise attack” in this situation have been made clear by analyses of the dangers that exist when two countries have first strike capabilities.<sup>2</sup> There is no way for the state to increase its security without menacing, or even attacking, the other. Even Bismarck, who once called preventive war “committing suicide from fear of death,” said that “no government, if it regards war as inevitable even if it does not want it, would be so foolish as to leave to the enemy the choice of time and occasion and to wait for the moment which is most convenient for the enemy.”<sup>3</sup> In another arena, the same dilemma applies to the policeman in a dark alley confronting a suspected criminal who appears to be holding a weapon. Though racism may indeed be present, the security dilemma can account for many of the tragic shootings of innocent people in the ghettos.

Beliefs about the course of a war in which the offense has the advantage further deepen the security dilemma. When there are incentives to strike first, a successful attack will usually so weaken the other side that victory will be relatively quick, bloodless, and decisive. It is in these periods when conquest is possible and attractive that states consolidate power internally—for instance, by destroying the feudal barons—and expand externally. There are several consequences that decrease the chance of cooperation among status-quo states. First, war will be profitable for the winner. The costs will be low and the benefits high. Of course, losers will suffer; the fear of losing could induce states to try to form stable cooperative arrangements, but the temptation of victory will make this particularly difficult. Second, because wars are expected to be both frequent and short, there will be incentives for high levels of arms, and quick and strong reaction to the other’s increases in arms. The state cannot afford to wait until there is unambiguous evidence that the other is building new weapons. Even large states that have faith in their economic strength cannot wait, because the war will be over before their products can reach the army. Third, when wars are quick, states will have to recruit allies in advance.<sup>4</sup> Without the opportunity for bargaining and re-alignments during the opening stages of hostilities, peacetime diplomacy loses a degree of the fluidity that facilitates balance-of-power policies. Because alliances must be secured during peacetime, the international system is more likely to become bipolar. It is hard to say whether war therefore becomes more or less likely, but this bipolarity increases tension between the two camps and makes it harder for status-quo states to gain the benefits of cooperation. Fourth, if wars are frequent, statesmen’s perceptual thresholds will be adjusted accordingly and they will be quick to perceive ambiguous evidence as indicating that others are aggressive. Thus, there will be more cases of status-quo powers arming against each other in the incorrect belief that the other is hostile.

When the defense has the advantage, all the foregoing is reversed. The state that fears attack does not pre-empt—since that would be a wasteful use of its military resources—but rather prepares to receive an attack. Doing so does not decrease the security of others, and several states can do it simultaneously; the situation will therefore be stable, and status-quo powers will be able to cooperate. When Herman Kahn argues that ultimatums “are vastly too dangerous to give because . . . they are quite likely to touch off a pre-emptive strike,”<sup>5</sup> he incorrectly assumes that it is always advantageous to strike first.

More is involved than short-run dynamics. When the defense is dominant, wars are likely to become stalemates and can be won only at enormous cost. Relatively small and weak states can hold off larger and stronger ones, or can deter attack by raising the costs of conquest to an unacceptable level. States then approach equality in what they can do to each other. Like the .45-caliber pistol in the American West, fortifications were the “great equalizer” in some periods. Changes in the status quo are less frequent and cooperation is more common wherever the security dilemma is thereby reduced . . .

*Technology and geography.* Technology and geography are the two main factors that determine whether the offense or the defense has the advantage. As Brodie notes, "On the tactical level, as a rule, few physical factors favor the attacker but many favor the defender. The defender usually has the advantage of cover. He characteristically fires from behind some form of shelter while his opponent crosses open ground."<sup>6</sup> Anything that increases the amount of ground the attacker has to cross, or impedes his progress across it, or makes him more vulnerable while crossing, increases the advantage accruing to the defense. When states are separated by barriers that produce these effects, the security dilemma is eased, since both can have forces adequate for defense without being able to attack. Impenetrable barriers would actually prevent war: in reality, decision makers have to settle for a good deal less. Buffer zones slow the attacker's progress; they thereby give the defender time to prepare, increase problems of logistics, and reduce the number of soldiers available for the final assault. At the end of the 19th century, Arthur Balfour noted Afghanistan's "non-conducting" qualities. "So long as it possesses few roads, and no railroads, it will be impossible for Russia to make effective use of her great numerical superiority at any point immediately vital to the Empire." The Russians valued buffers for the same reasons; it is not surprising that when Persia was being divided into Russian and British spheres of influence some years later, the Russians sought assurances that the British would refrain from building potentially menacing railroads in their sphere. Indeed, since railroad construction radically altered the abilities of countries to defend themselves and to attack others, many diplomatic notes and much intelligence activity in the late 19th century centered on this subject.<sup>7</sup>

Oceans, large rivers, and mountain ranges serve the same function as buffer zones. Being hard to cross, they allow defense against superior numbers. The defender has merely to stay on his side of the barrier and so can utilize all the men he can bring up to it. The attacker's men, however, can cross only a few at a time, and they are very vulnerable when doing so. If all states were self-sufficient islands, anarchy would be much less of a problem. A small investment in shore defenses and a small army would be sufficient to repel invasion. Only very weak states would be vulnerable, and only very large ones could menace others. As noted above, the United States, and to a lesser extent Great Britain, have partly been able to escape from the state of nature because their geographical positions approximated this ideal.

Although geography cannot be changed to conform to borders, borders can and do change to conform to geography. Borders across which an attack is easy tend to be unstable. States living within them are likely to expand or be absorbed. Frequent wars are almost inevitable since attacking will often seem the best way to protect what one has. This process will stop, or at least slow down, when the state's borders reach—by expansion or contraction—a line of natural obstacles. Security without attack will then be possible. Furthermore, these lines constitute salient solutions to bargaining problems and, to the extent that they are barriers to migration, are likely to divide ethnic groups, thereby raising the costs and lowering the incentives for conquest.

Attachment to one's state and its land reinforce one quasi-geographical aid to the defense. Conquest usually becomes more difficult the deeper the attacker pushes into the other's territory. Nationalism spurs the defenders to fight harder; advancing not only lengthens the attacker's supply lines, but takes him through unfamiliar and often devastated lands that require troops for garrison duty. These stabilizing dynamics will not operate, however, if the defender's war materiel is situated near its borders, or if the people do not care about their state, but only about being on the winning side. In such cases, positive feedback will be at work and initial defeats will be insurmountable . . .<sup>8</sup>

The other major determinant of the offense–defense balance is technology. When weapons are highly vulnerable, they must be employed before they are attacked. Others can remain quite invulnerable in their bases. The former characteristics are embodied in unprotected missiles and many kinds of bombers. (It should be noted that it is not vulnerability *per se* that is crucial, but the location of the vulnerability. Bombers and missiles that are easy to destroy only after having been launched toward their targets do not create destabilizing dynamics.) Incentives to strike first are usually absent for naval forces that are threatened by a naval attack. Like missiles in hardened silos, they are usually well protected when in their bases. Both sides can then simultaneously be prepared to defend themselves successfully . . .

The situation today with respect to conventional weapons is unclear. Until recently it was believed that tanks and tactical air power gave the attacker an advantage. The initial analyses of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war indicated that new anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons have restored the primacy of the defense. These weapons are cheap, easy to use, and can destroy a high proportion of the attacking vehicles and planes that are sighted. It then would make sense for a status-quo power to buy lots of \$20,000 missiles rather than buy a few half-million dollar tanks and multi-million dollar fighter-bombers. Defense would be possible even against a large and well-equipped force; states that care primarily about self-protection would not need to engage in arms races. But further examinations of the new technologies and the history of the October War cast doubt on these optimistic conclusions and leave us unable to render any firm judgment.<sup>9</sup>

Concerning nuclear weapons, it is generally agreed that defense is impossible—a triumph not of the offense, but of deterrence. Attack makes no sense, not because it can be beaten off, but because the attacker will be destroyed in turn. In terms of the questions under consideration here, the result is the equivalent of the primacy of the defense. First, security is relatively cheap. Less than one percent of the G.N.P. is devoted to deterring a direct attack on the United States; most of it is spent on acquiring redundant systems to provide a lot of insurance against the worst conceivable contingencies. Second, both sides can simultaneously gain security in the form of second-strike capability. Third, and related to the foregoing, second-strike capability can be maintained in the face of wide variations in the other side's military posture. There is no purely military reason why each side has to react quickly and strongly to the other's increases in arms. Any spending that the other devotes to trying to achieve first-strike capability can be neutralized by the state's spending much smaller sums on protecting its second-strike capability. Fourth, there are no incentives to strike first in a crisis.

Important problems remain, of course. Both sides have interests that go well beyond defense of the homeland. The protection of these interests creates conflicts even if neither side desires expansion. Furthermore, the shift from defense to deterrence has greatly increased the importance and perceptions of resolve. Security now rests on each side's belief that the other would prefer to run high risks of total destruction rather than sacrifice its vital interests. Aspects of the security dilemma thus appear in a new form. Are weapons procurements used as an index of resolve? Must they be so used? If one side fails to respond to the other's buildup, will it appear weak and thereby invite predation? Can both sides simultaneously have images of high resolve or is there a zero-sum element involved? Although these problems are real, they are not as severe as those in the prenuclear era: there are many indices of resolve, and states do not so much judge images of resolve in the abstract as ask how likely it is that the other will stand firm in a particular dispute. Since states are most likely to stand firm on matters which concern them most, it is quite possible for both to demonstrate their resolve to protect their own security simultaneously.



### ***Offense–defense differentiation***

The other major variable that affects how strongly the security dilemma operates is whether weapons and policies that protect the state also provide the capability for attack. If they do not, the basic postulate of the security dilemma no longer applies. A state can increase its own security without decreasing that of others. The advantage of the defense can only ameliorate the security dilemma. A differentiation between offensive and defensive stances comes close to abolishing it. Such differentiation does not mean, however, that all security problems will be abolished. If the offense has the advantage, conquest and aggression will still be possible. And if the offense's advantage is great enough, status-quo powers may find it too expensive to protect themselves by defensive forces and decide to procure offensive weapons even though this will menace others. Furthermore, states will still have to worry that even if the other's military posture shows that it is peaceful now, it may develop aggressive intentions in the future.

Assuming the defense is at least as potent as the offense, the differentiation between them allows status-quo states to behave in ways that are clearly different from those of aggressors. Three beneficial consequences follow. First, status-quo powers can identify each other, thus laying the foundations for cooperation. Conflicts growing out of the mistaken belief that the other side is expansionist will be less frequent. Second, status-quo states will obtain advance warning when others plan aggression. Before a state can attack, it has to develop and deploy offensive weapons. If procurement of these weapons cannot be disguised and takes a fair amount of time, as it almost always does, a status-quo state will have the time to take countermeasures. It need not maintain a high level of defensive arms as long as its potential adversaries are adopting a peaceful posture. (Although being so armed should not, with the one important exception noted below, alarm other status-quo powers.) States do, in fact, pay special attention to actions that they believe would not be taken by a status-quo state because they feel that states exhibiting such behavior are aggressive. Thus the seizure or development of transportation facilities will alarm others more if these facilities have no commercial value, and therefore can only be wanted for military reasons. In 1906, the British rejected a Russian protest about their activities in a district of Persia by claiming that this area was "only of [strategic] importance [to the Russians] if they wished to attack the Indian frontier, or to put pressure upon us by making us think that they intend to attack it . . ." <sup>10</sup>

## **IV. Four worlds**

The two variables we have been discussing—whether the offense or the defense has the advantage, and whether offensive postures can be distinguished from defensive ones—can be combined to yield four possible worlds.

The first world is the worst for status-quo states. There is no way to get security without menacing others, and security through defense is terribly difficult to obtain. Because offensive and defensive postures are the same, status-quo states acquire the same kind of arms that are sought by aggressors. And because the offense has the advantage over the defense, attacking is the best route to protecting what you have; status-quo states will therefore behave like aggressors. The situation will be unstable. Arms races are likely. Incentives to strike first will turn crises into wars. Decisive victories and conquests will be common. States will grow and shrink rapidly, and it will be hard for any state to maintain its size and influence without trying to increase them. Cooperation among status-quo powers will be extremely hard to achieve.

	OFFENSE HAS THE ADVANTAGE	DEFENSE HAS THE ADVANTAGE
OFFENSIVE POSTURE NOT DISTINGUISHABLE FROM DEFENSIVE ONE	1  Doubly dangerous	2  Security dilemma, but security requirements may be compatible.
OFFENSIVE POSTURE DISTINGUISHABLE FROM DEFENSIVE ONE	3 No security dilemma, but aggression possible. Status-quo states can follow different policy than aggressors. Warning given.	4  Doubly stable

There are no cases that totally fit this picture, but it bears more than a passing resemblance to Europe before World War I. Britain and Germany, although in many respects natural allies, ended up as enemies. Of course much of the explanation lies in Germany's ill-chosen policy. And from the perspective of our theory, the powers' ability to avoid war in a series of earlier crises cannot be easily explained. Nevertheless, much of the behavior in this period was the product of technology and beliefs that magnified the security dilemma. Decision makers thought that the offense had a big advantage and saw little difference between offensive and defensive military postures. The era was characterized by arms races. And once war seemed likely, mobilization races created powerful incentives to strike first.

In the nuclear era, the first world would be one in which each side relied on vulnerable weapons that were aimed at similar forces and each side understood the situation. In this case, incentives to strike first would be very high—so high that status-quo powers as well as aggressors would be sorely tempted to pre-empt. And since the forces could be used to change the status quo as well as to preserve it, there would be no way for both sides to increase their security simultaneously. Now the familiar logic of deterrence leads both sides to see the dangers in this world. Indeed, the new understanding of this situation was one reason why vulnerable bombers and missiles were replaced. Ironically, the 1950's would have been more hazardous if the decision makers had been aware of the dangers of their posture and had therefore felt greater pressure to strike first. This situation could be recreated if both sides were to rely on MIRVed ICBM's.

In the second world, the security dilemma operates because offensive and defensive postures cannot be distinguished; but it does not operate as strongly as in the first world because the defense has the advantage, and so an increment in one side's strength increases its security more than it decreases the other's. So, if both sides have reasonable subjective security requirements, are of roughly equal power, and the variables discussed earlier are favorable, it is quite likely that status-quo states can adopt compatible security policies. Although a state will not be able to judge the other's intentions from the kinds of weapons it procures, the level of arms spending will give important evidence. Of course a state that seeks a high level of arms might be not an aggressor but merely an insecure state, which if conciliated will reduce its arms, and if confronted will reply in kind. To assume that the apparently excessive level of arms indicates aggressiveness could therefore lead to a

response that would deepen the dilemma and create needless conflict. But empathy and skillful statesmanship can reduce this danger. Furthermore, the advantageous position of the defense means that a status-quo state can often maintain a high degree of security with a level of arms lower than that of its expected adversary. Such a state demonstrates that it lacks ability or desire to alter the status quo, at least at the present time. The strength of the defense also allows states to react slowly and with restraint when they fear that others are menacing them. So, although status-quo powers will to some extent be threatening to others, that extent will be limited.

This world is the one that comes closest to matching most periods in history. Attacking is usually harder than defending because of the strength of fortifications and obstacles. But purely defensive postures are rarely possible because fortifications are usually supplemented by armies and mobile guns which can support an attack. In the nuclear era, this world would be one in which both sides relied on relatively invulnerable ICBM's and believed that limited nuclear war was impossible. Assuming no MIRV's, it would take more than one attacking missile to destroy one of the adversary's. Pre-emption is therefore unattractive. If both sides have large inventories, they can ignore all but drastic increases on the other side. A world of either ICBM's or SLBM's in which both sides adopted the "Schlesinger Doctrine" would probably fit in this category too. The means of preserving the status quo would also be the means of changing it, as we discussed earlier. And the defense usually would have the advantage, because compellence is more difficult than deterrence. Although a state might succeed in changing the status quo on issues that matter much more to it than to others, status-quo powers could deter major provocations under most circumstances.

In the third world there may be no security dilemma, but there are security problems. Because states can procure defensive systems that do not threaten others, the dilemma need not operate. But because the offense has the advantage, aggression is possible, and perhaps easy. If the offense has enough of an advantage, even a status-quo state may take the initiative rather than risk being attacked and defeated. If the offense has less of an advantage, stability and cooperation are likely because the status-quo states will procure defensive forces. They need not react to others who are similarly armed, but can wait for the warning they would receive if others started to deploy offensive weapons. But each state will have to watch the others carefully, and there is room for false suspicions. The costliness of the defense and the allure of the offense can lead to unnecessary mistrust, hostility, and war, unless some of the variables discussed earlier are operating to restrain defection.

A hypothetical nuclear world that would fit this description would be one in which both sides relied on SLBM's, but in which ASW technologies were very effective. Offense and defense would be different, but the former would have the advantage. This situation is not likely to occur; but if it did, a status-quo state could show its lack of desire to exploit the other by refraining from threatening its submarines. The desire to have more protecting you than merely the other side's fear of retaliation is a strong one, however, and a state that knows that it would not expand even if its cities were safe is likely to believe that the other would not feel threatened by its ASW program. It is easy to see how such a world could become unstable, and how spirals of tensions and conflict could develop.

The fourth world is doubly safe. The differentiation between offensive and defensive systems permits a way out of the security dilemma; the advantage of the defense disposes of the problems discussed in the previous paragraphs. There is no reason for a status-quo power to be tempted to procure offensive forces, and aggressors give notice of their intentions by the posture they adopt. Indeed, if the advantage of the defense is great enough, there are no security problems. The loss of the ultimate form of the power to alter the status quo would

allow greater scope for the exercise of nonmilitary means and probably would tend to freeze the distribution of values.

This world would have existed in the first decade of the 20th century if the decision makers had understood the available technology. In that case, the European powers would have followed different policies both in the long run and in the summer of 1914. Even Germany, facing powerful enemies on both sides, could have made herself secure by developing strong defenses. France could also have made her frontier almost impregnable. Furthermore, when crises arose, no one would have had incentives to strike first. There would have been no competitive mobilization races reducing the time available for negotiations.

In the nuclear era, this world would be one in which the superpowers relied on SLBM's, ASW technology was not up to its task, and limited nuclear options were not taken seriously. We have discussed this situation earlier; here we need only add that, even if our analysis is correct and even if the policies and postures of both sides were to move in this direction, the problem of violence below the nuclear threshold would remain. On issues other than defense of the homeland, there would still be security dilemmas and security problems. But the world would nevertheless be safer than it has usually been.

## Notes

- 1 Thus, when Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press 1962), 126, argues that a status-quo state that settles for rough equality of power with its adversary, rather than seeking preponderance, may be able to convince the other to reciprocate by showing that it wants only to protect itself, not menace the other, he assumes that the defense has an advantage.
- 2 Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press 1963), Chapter 9.
- 3 Quoted in Fritz Fischer, *War of Illusions* (New York: Norton 1975), 377, 461.
- 4 George Quester, *Offense and Defense in the International System* (New York: John Wiley 1977), 105–06; Raymond Sontag, *European Diplomatic History, 1871–1932* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts 1933), 4–5.
- 5 Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1960), 211 (also see 144).
- 6 Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1959), 179.
- 7 Arthur Balfour, "Memorandum," Committee on Imperial Defence, April 30, 1903, pp. 2–3; see telegram by Sir Arthur Nicolson, in G.P. Gooch and Harold Temperley, eds., *British Documents on the Origins of the War*, Vol. 4 (London: H.M.S.O. 1929), 429, 524. These barriers do not prevent the passage of long-range aircrafts but even in the air, distance usually aids the defender.
- 8 See for example the discussion of warfare among Chinese warlords in Hsi-Sheng Chi, "The Chinese Warlord System as an International System," in Morton Kaplan, ed., *New Approaches to International Relations* (New York: St. Martin's 1968), 405–25.
- 9 Geoffrey Kemp, Robert Pfaltzgraff, and Uri Ra'anani, eds., *The Other Arms Race* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath 1975); James Foster, "The Future of Conventional Arms Control," *Policy Sciences*, No. 8 (Spring 1977), 1–19.
- 10 Richard Challener, *Admirals, Generals, and American Foreign Policy, 1898–1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1973), 273; Grey to Nicolson, in Gooch and Temperley (note 6), 414.

# Alliance formation and the balance of world power

*Stephen M. Walt*

From: *International Security* 9, no. 4 (Spring 1985): 3–43.

## **Balancing versus bandwagoning: alliances as a response to threat**

Alliances are most commonly viewed as a response to threats, yet there is sharp disagreement as to what that response will be. When entering an alliance, states may either *balance* (ally in opposition to the principal source of danger) or *bandwagon* (ally with the state that poses the major threat).<sup>1</sup> These contrasting hypotheses depict very different worlds, and the policies that follow from each are equally distinct. In the simplest terms, if balancing is more common than bandwagoning, then states are more secure because aggressors will face combined opposition. Status quo states should therefore avoid provoking countervailing coalitions by eschewing threatening foreign and defense policies. But if bandwagoning is the dominant tendency, then security is scarce because aggression is rewarded. A more belligerent foreign policy and a more capable military establishment are the logical policy choices . . .

## ***Different sources of threat***

Balancing and bandwagoning are usually framed solely in terms of power. Balancing is alignment with the weaker side; bandwagoning means to choose the stronger.<sup>2</sup> This view is seriously flawed, however, because it ignores the other factors that statesmen will consider when identifying potential threats and prospective allies. Although power is an important factor in their calculations, it is not the only one. Rather than allying in response to power alone, it is more accurate to say that states will ally with or against the most *threatening* power. For example, states may *balance* by allying with other strong states, if a weaker power is more dangerous for other reasons. Thus the coalitions that defeated Germany in World Wars I and II were vastly superior in total resources, but united by their common recognition that German expansionism posed the greater danger.<sup>3</sup> Because balancing and bandwagoning are more accurately viewed as response to threats, it is important to consider all the factors that will affect the level of threat that states may pose. I shall therefore discuss the impact of: 1) aggregate power; 2) proximity; 3) offensive capability; and 4) offensive intentions.

*Aggregate power.* The greater a state's total resources (i.e., population, industrial and military capability, technological prowess, etc.), the greater a potential threat it can pose to others. Recognizing this, Walter Lippmann and George Kennan defined the aim of American grand strategy to be preventing any single state from controlling the combined resources of industrial Eurasia, and they advocated U.S. intervention on whichever side was weaker when this prospect emerged.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Lord Grey, British Foreign Secretary in 1914, justified British intervention against the Dual Alliance by saying:

To stand aside would mean the domination of Germany; the subordination of France and Russia; the isolation of Britain, . . . and ultimately Germany would wield the whole power of the continent.<sup>5</sup>

In the same way, Castlereagh's aim to create a "just distribution of the forces in Europe" reveals his own concern for the distribution of aggregate power, as does Bismarck's dictum that "in a system of five great powers, the goal must always be to be in a group of three or more."<sup>6</sup> The overall power that states can wield is thus an important component of the threat they can pose to others.

If power can be threatening, however, it can also be prized. States with great power have the capacity either to punish enemies or reward friends. By itself, therefore, another state's aggregate power may be a motive for either balancing or bandwagoning.

*Proximate power.* States will also align in response to threats from proximate power. Because the ability to project power declines with distance, states that are nearby pose a greater threat than those that are far away.<sup>7</sup> For example, the British Foreign Office explained why Britain was especially sensitive to German naval expansion by saying:

If the British press pays more attention to the increase of Germany's naval power than to a similar movement in Brazil . . . this is no doubt due to the proximity of the German coasts and the remoteness of Brazil.<sup>8</sup>

As with aggregate power, proximate threats can produce either a balancing or a bandwagoning response. When proximate threats trigger a balancing response, alliance networks that resemble checkerboards are the likely result. Students of diplomatic history have long been told that "neighbors of neighbors are friends," and the tendency for encircling states to align against a central power has been known since Kautilya's writings in the 4th century.<sup>9</sup> Examples include: France and Russia against Wilhelmine Germany; France and the "Little Entente" in the 1930s; the Soviet Union and Vietnam against China and Cambodia in the 1970s; the U.S.S.R. and India against the U.S. and Pakistan presently; and the tacit alignment between Iran and Syria against Iraq and its various Arab supporters. When a threat from proximate power leads to bandwagoning, by contrast, the familiar phenomenon of a "sphere of influence" is created. Small states bordering a great power may be so vulnerable that they choose to bandwagon rather than balance, especially if their powerful neighbor has demonstrated its ability to compel obedience. Thus Finland, whose name has become synonymous with bandwagoning, chose to do so only after losing two major wars against the Soviet Union within a five-year period.

*Offensive power.* All else being equal, states with large offensive capabilities are more likely to provoke an alliance than those who are either militarily weak or capable only of defending.<sup>10</sup> Once again, the effects of this factor vary. On the one hand, the immediate threat that such capabilities pose may lead states to balance by allying with others.<sup>11</sup> Tirpitz's "risk strategy" backfired for precisely this reason. England viewed the German battle fleet as a potent offensive threat, and redoubled its own naval efforts while reinforcing its ties with France and Russia.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, when offensive power permits rapid conquest, vulnerable states may see little hope in resisting. Balancing may seem unwise because one's allies may not be able to provide assistance quickly enough. This is another reason why "spheres of influence" may form: states bordering those with large offensive capabilities (and who are far from potential allies) may be forced to bandwagon because balancing alliances are simply not viable.<sup>13</sup>



*Offensive intentions.* Finally, states that appear aggressive are likely to provoke others to balance against them. As I noted earlier, Nazi Germany provoked an overwhelming coalition against itself because it combined substantial power with extremely offensive ambitions. Indeed, even states with rather modest capabilities may trigger a balancing response if they are perceived as especially aggressive. Thus Libya under Colonel Qaddafi has prompted Egypt, Israel, France, the U.S., Chad, and the Sudan to coordinate political and military responses in order to defend against Libyan activities.<sup>14</sup>

Perceptions of intent play an especially crucial role in alliance choices. In addition to the factors already mentioned, for example, changing perceptions of German aims helped create the Triple Entente. Whereas Bismarck had followed a careful policy of defending the status quo after 1870, the expansionist ambitions of his successors provoked steadily increasing alarm among the other European powers.<sup>15</sup> Although the growth of German power played a major role, the importance of German intentions should not be ignored. This is nicely revealed by Eyre Crowe's famous 1907 memorandum defining British policy towards Germany. The analysis is all the more striking because Crowe obviously has few objections to the growth of German power *per se*:

It cannot for a moment be questioned that the mere existence and healthy activity of a powerful Germany is an undoubted blessing for all . . . *So long, then, as Germany competes for an intellectual and moral leadership of the world in reliance on its own natural advantages and energies* England cannot but admire. . . . [So] *long as Germany's action does not overstep the line of legitimate protection of existing rights it can always count upon the sympathy and good will*, and even the moral support of England. . . . It would be of real advantage if the determination not to bar Germany's *legitimate and peaceful expansion* were made as patent and pronounced as authoritatively as possible, provided that care was taken at the same time to make it quite clear that *this benevolent attitude will give way to determined opposition at the first sign* of British or allied interests being adversely affected.<sup>16</sup>

In short, Britain will oppose Germany only if Germany seeks to expand through conquest. Intentions, not power, are crucial.

When a state is believed to be unalterably aggressive, others are unlikely to bandwagon. After all, if an aggressor's intentions are impossible to change, then balancing with others is the best way to avoid becoming a victim. Thus Prime Minister de Broqueville of Belgium rejected the German ultimatum of August 2, 1914 by saying:

If die we must, better death with honor. We have no other choice. Our submission would serve no end . . . if Germany is victorious, Belgium, *whatever her attitude*, will be annexed to the Reich.<sup>17</sup>

In short, the more aggressive or expansionist a state appears, the more likely it is to trigger an opposing coalition.

By refining the basic hypotheses to consider several sources of threat, we gain a more complete picture of the factors that statesmen will consider when making alliance choices. However, one cannot say a priori which sources of threat will be most important in any given case, only that all of them are likely to play a role. The next step is to consider which—balancing or bandwagoning—is the dominant tendency in international affairs . . .

***Why balancing is more common than bandwagoning***

Which of these two worlds most resembles reality? Which hypothesis describes the dominant tendency in international politics? Although statesmen frequently justify their actions by invoking the bandwagoning hypothesis, history provides little evidence for this assertion. On the contrary, balance of power theorists from Ranke forward have persistently and persuasively shown that states facing an external threat overwhelmingly prefer to balance against the threat rather than bandwagon with it. This is primarily because an alignment that preserves most of a state's freedom of action is preferable to accepting subordination under a potential hegemon. Because intentions can change and perceptions are unreliable, it is safer to balance against potential threats than to hope that strong states will remain benevolent.

The overwhelming tendency for states to balance rather than bandwagon defeated the hegemonic aspirations of Spain under Philip II, France under Louis XIV and Napoleon, and Germany under Wilhelm II and Hitler. Where the bandwagoning hypothesis predicts that these potential hegemons should have attracted more and more support as they expanded, the actual response of the powers that they threatened was precisely the opposite. The more clearly any one state sought to dominate the rest, the more reliably the others combined to counter the threat<sup>18</sup> . . .

**Notes**

- 1 My use of the terms "balancing" and "bandwagoning" follows that of Kenneth Waltz in his *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979). Arnold Wolfers uses a similar terminology in his essay "The Balance of Power in Theory and Practice," in *Discord and Collaboration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), pp. 122–124.
- 2 The preeminent example of balance of power theory focusing exclusively on the distribution of capabilities is Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Chapter 6. For examples of theorists who acknowledge that other factors can be important, see Edward V. Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power* (New York: W. W. Norton 1955), pp. 25, 45–47, 60–62.
- 3 In World War I, the alliance of Great Britain, France, and Russia controlled 27.9 percent of world industrial production, while Germany and Austria together controlled only 19.2 percent. With Russia out of the war but the United States joining Britain and France, the percentage opposing the Dual Alliance reached 51.7 percent, an advantage of more than 2 to 1. In World War II, the defense expenditures of the U.S., Great Britain, and the Soviet Union exceeded those of Germany by roughly 4.5 to 1. Even allowing for Germany's control of Europe and the need to fight Japan, the Grand Alliance possessed an enormous advantage in latent capabilities. Thus balancing against power was not the sole explanation for these alliances. For these and other statistics on the relative power in these two wars, see: Paul M. Kennedy, "The First World War and the International Power System," *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Summer 1984), pp. 7–40; and *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: Macmillan, 1983), pp. 309–315.
- 4 For a summary of these ideas, see John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 25–88. Kennan's own thoughts are found in his *Realities of American Foreign Policy* (New York: New American Library, 1951), p. 10. Lippmann's still compelling analysis is found in his *The Cold War: A Study of U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1947).
- 5 Quoted in Bernadotte Schmitt, *The Coming of the War in 1914* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1968), Vol. 2, p. 115.
- 6 Castlereagh's policy is described in Harold Nicolson, *The Congress of Vienna* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1946), pp. 205–206. Bismarck's statement is quoted in William L. Langer, *European Alliances and Alignments*, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 1950), p. 197.
- 7 See Harvey Starr and Benjamin A. Most, "The Substance and Study of Borders in International Relations Research," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 20 (1976). For a discussion of the

relationship between power and distance, see Kenneth A. Boulding, *Conflict and Defense: A General Theory* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), pp. 229–230, 245–247. For an interesting practical critique, see Albert Wohlstetter, “Illusions of Distance,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Fall 1968).

- 8 Quoted in Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1980), p. 421.
- 9 Kautilya’s analysis ran as follows: “The king who is situated anywhere immediately on the circumference of the conqueror’s territory is termed the enemy. The king who is likewise situated close to the enemy, but separated from the conqueror only by the enemy is termed the friend (of the conqueror). . . . In front of the conqueror and close to the enemy, there happened to be situated kings such as the conqueror’s friend, next to him the enemy’s friend, and next to the last the conqueror’s friend’s friend, and next, the enemy’s friend’s friend.” See “Arthashastra” (Science of Politics), in Paul A. Seabury, ed., *Balance of Power* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1965), p. 8.
- 10 The best discussions of the implications of offense and defense are: Robert Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (January 1978); Stephen W. Van Evera, “Causes of War” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1984); and George H. Quester, *Offense and Defense in the International System* (New York: Wiley, 1977).
- 11 See Langer, *European Alliances and Alignments*, pp. 3–5; Raymond J. Sontag, *European Diplomatic History, 1871–1932* (New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, 1933), pp. 4–5; Jervis, “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma,” p. 189; and Quester, *Offense and Defense in the International System*, pp. 105–106.
- 12 As Imanuel Geiss notes: “Finding an agreement with Britain along German lines without a substantial naval agreement thus amounted to squaring the circle.” See his *German Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 131. See also Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism*, pp. 416–423.
- 13 Thus alliance formation becomes more *frenetic* when the offense is believed to have the advantage: great powers will balance more vigorously while weak states seek protection by bandwagoning more frequently. A world of tight alliances and few neutral states is the likely result.
- 14 For a discussion of Libya’s international position, see Claudia Wright, “Libya and the West: Headlong Into Confrontation?,” *International Affairs* (London), Vol. 58, No.1 (Winter 1981–82), pp. 13–41.
- 15 See Gordon L. Craig, *Germany: 1866–1945* (London: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 101, 242–247, and Chapter 10; Geiss, *German Foreign Policy*, pp. 66–68; and Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism*, Chapters 14 and 20.
- 16 “Memorandum by Sir Eyre Crowe on the Present State of British Relations with France and Germany, January 1, 1907,” in G.P. Gooch and Harold Temperley, eds., *British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898–1914* (London: British Foreign Office, 1928), Volume 3, pp. 403 and *passim* (emphasis added). See also G.W. Monger, *The End of Isolation: British Foreign Policy 1900–1907* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1963), pp. 313–315.
- 17 Quoted in Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War in 1914* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), Volume 3, p. 458 (emphasis added).
- 18 See Jack S. Levy, “Theories of General War,” unpublished ms., 1984. (An extensively revised version of this paper will be published in *World Politics*, April 1985.)

# Introduction

*Stephen Van Evera*

From: *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), Chapter 1.

## Questions addressed, why they arise

What caused the great wars of modern times? Of those causes, which were preventable? What are the likely causes of future wars, and how can those wars best be prevented?

These are the questions I address. They are not new. Devising schemes to prevent war has been a philosophers' industry for centuries. Dante Alighieri, William Penn, the abbé de Saint Pierre, Immanuel Kant, Jeremy Bentham, and James Mill all gave it a try.<sup>1</sup> Later, the goal of war prevention helped inspire the founder of the first modern school of political science, a U.S. Civil War veteran who sought to prevent war and hoped the study of politics would offer answers.<sup>2</sup> Still later, the international politics subfield embraced war prevention as a prime focus during its rapid growth after World War I.<sup>3</sup>

Sadly, though, scholars have made scant progress on the problem. A vast literature on the causes of war has appeared,<sup>4</sup> but this literature says little about how war can be prevented.<sup>5</sup> Most of the many causes that it identifies cannot be manipulated (for example, human instinct, the nature of the domestic economic or political systems of states, or the distribution of power among states). Many hypotheses that identify manipulable causes have not been tested, leaving skeptics free to reject them. Accordingly, these writings are largely ignored by opinion leaders, policymakers, and peace groups.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, failed peace ideas—for example, disarmament, pacifism, and large reliance on international institutions to resolve conflict—remain popular for lack of better alternatives.

In short, our stock of hypotheses on the causes of war is large but useless. Those culling it for tools to prevent war will find slim pickings. Accordingly, my main purpose here is to propose prescriptively useful hypotheses on war's causes—that is, hypotheses that point to war causes that can feasibly be reduced or addressed by countermeasures. Toward this goal I elaborate existing hypotheses that have been underappreciated or underdeveloped, and I propose a few new ones . . .

## Arguments advanced, answers offered

This book concentrates on war causes related to the character and distribution of national power. Power factors deserve attention because they strongly influence the probability and intensity of war, they are relatively malleable, and they remain understudied and underappreciated, despite a growing literature that addresses them.<sup>7</sup> Thomas Schelling notes that there is “something we might call the ‘inherent propensity toward peace or war’ embodied in weaponry, the geography, and the military organization of the time.”<sup>8</sup> This volume develops Schelling's idea by exploring five specific hypotheses:

H1. War is more likely when states fall prey to false optimism about its outcome.

H2. War is more likely when the advantage lies with the first side to mobilize or attack.

H3. War is more likely when the relative power of states fluctuates sharply—that is, when windows of opportunity and vulnerability are large.

H4. War is more likely when resources are cumulative—that is, when the control of resources enables a state to protect or acquire other resources.

H5. War is more likely when conquest is easy.

These hypotheses have been discussed before, but they have not been fully developed and their strength has been underestimated. None have been well tested . . .

How much war can these five hypotheses explain? I argue that the causes of war they identify are potent when present, but four of the five (first-move advantage, windows, resource cumulativeness, and easy conquest—all except false optimism) are rather rare in the real world, especially in the modern world. Thus they explain only a moderate amount of history as such. They explain a great deal of history, however, if they are recast as hypotheses on the effects of false *perceptions* of the dangers they frame. In fact, these misperceptions are common: states often exaggerate the size of first-move advantages, the size of windows of opportunity and vulnerability, the degree of resource cumulativeness, and the ease of conquest. They then adopt war-causing policies in response to these illusions.

Thus the structure of power per se is benign and causes rather few wars, but the structure of power as perceived is often malignant and explains a good deal of war.

Realism argues that international politics is largely shaped by states' pursuit of power and by the distribution (or perceived distribution) of power among states.<sup>9</sup> Scholars have long quarreled over the value of the Realist approach. This book supports five arguments that bear on the value of Realism.

1. The structure of international power, and perceptions of that power structure, strongly affect the probability of war. When these factors incline states toward war, the risk of war is far greater. Hence Realism's focus on power and its distribution is well placed.

2. The *fine-grained* structure of power has far greater impact on the risk of war than does the *gross* structure of power. Realists have focused on the gross structure of power—that is, the distribution of aggregate capabilities. Is it bipolar or multipolar? Is power equally or unequally distributed across states and coalitions? Is the distribution of international privileges apportioned to the gross distribution of international power? Realists compare gross quantities of power but rarely distinguish types of power. In contrast, this book addresses the fine-grained structure of power—that is, the distribution of particular types of power. We can distinguish offensive power from defensive power, and the power to strike first from the power to retaliate after taking a first strike. We can further distinguish rising power, waning power, and the power to parlay gains into further gains. The distribution of these capacities defines the fine-grained structure of power. I argue that the gross structure of power explains little; the fine-grained structure explains far more.

Realism has been criticized for offering few hypotheses on the causes of war,<sup>10</sup> or for proposing hypotheses of uncertain validity and strength.<sup>11</sup> This weakness stems from Realists' focus on the gross structure of power. When Realism is expanded to include the fine-grained structure of power, its net explanatory power is vastly increased.

3. The fine-grained structure of power is more malleable than the gross structure; hence hypotheses that point to the fine-grained power structure yield more policy prescriptions. The bipolar or multipolar structure of the international system is fairly immutable. In contrast, the relative power of attackers and defenders can be shaped by national foreign and military policies.

Realism has been rightly criticized for failing to provide prescriptively useful explanations for the war problem. Even if Realist theories are valid, the argument goes, they are barren of solutions. Thus Robert Keohane complains that “Realism . . . is better at telling us why we are in such trouble than how to get out of it.” It “helps us determine the strength of the trap” set by international anarchy, “but does not give us much assistance in seeking an escape.”<sup>12</sup> This book offers Realist explanations that yield practical policy prescriptions.

4. The fine-grained structure of power is quite benign. The war-causing power structures identified below are rare in the real world. Two implications follow. First, the fine-grained power structure explains only a moderate amount of modern war. It explains more war than the gross structure of power, but its absolute explanatory power is only middling. Second, Realists who claim that the structure of international power rewards belligerent policies are wrong.<sup>13</sup> In fact the structure of international power provides more disincentives than incentives for aggression. Aggressors are more often punished than rewarded. Even successful aggression offers few benefits. Moreover, aggression seldom succeeds. Aggressor states usually are contained or destroyed.

5. The fine-grained structure of power is widely misperceived. Governments often think it more malignant than in fact it is. These misperceptions are a common cause of war and provide a strong explanation for past wars.

Realism thus is most powerful—that is, it explains the most international politics—if we repair it by shifting its focus (a) from the gross to the fine-grained structure of power and (b) from power itself to national perceptions of power.

This discussion suggests the need to define two new variants of Realism in addition to the “Classical Realism” and “Neorealism” (or “Structural Realism”) that now dominate the landscape. A number-letter system might be used to distinguish these four Realisms:

*Type I Realism* (formerly “Classical Realism”): the Realism of Hans Morgenthau and E. H. Carr. It posits that states seek power as a prime goal for reasons rooted in human nature. It locates the causes of war largely in this power drive and in situations where states enjoy greater or lesser privilege than their power could justify.<sup>14</sup>

*Type II Realism* (formerly “Neorealism” or “Structural Realism”): the Realism of Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer.<sup>15</sup> It posits that states seek security as a prime goal, for reasons rooted in the anarchic nature of the international system. It locates the causes of war largely in the gross structure of international power. *Type IIA Realism*, following Waltz’s argument in *Theory of International Politics*, holds that the polarity of the international system governs the risk of war: multipolar systems are more war prone than bipolar systems.<sup>16</sup> *Type IIB Realism* suggests other ways that the gross structure of power can shape the risk of war. Some Type IIB Realists reverse the Type IIA argument to assert that multipolarity is safer than bipolarity.<sup>17</sup> Some argue that an equal distribution of power between opposing states or coalitions is safer than inequality, and some argue oppositely that equality is more dangerous.<sup>18</sup>

*Type III Realism* (“fine-grained structural Realism”?) posits, like Type II Realism, that



states seek security as a prime goal, for reasons rooted in the anarchic nature of the international system. It locates the causes of war in the fine-grained structure of international power—in the offense–defense balance, the size of first-move advantages, the size and frequency of power fluctuations, and the cumulativeness of resources.<sup>19</sup>

*Type IV Realism* (“misperceptive fine-grained structural Realism”?) posits, like Type II and III Realism, that states seek security as a prime goal, for reasons rooted in the anarchic nature of the international system. It locates the causes of war in national misperceptions of the fine-grained structure of international power—in exaggeration of the power of the offense, the size of first-move advantages, the size and frequency of power fluctuations, and the cumulativeness of resources.

Type I Realism is largely barren of useful hypotheses on the causes of war. Type II Realism is only marginally more useful.

Type III Realism has some value. Its hypotheses have large importance and very wide explanatory range. They have only moderate real-world applicability, however, because the causes they identify are rare. Conquest rarely is easy, moving first seldom provides much reward, windows are few, seldom are large, and resources seldom are highly cumulative. Hence these hypotheses explain only a middling amount of modern history. They have some prescriptive utility, because the causes they identify are somewhat manipulable, but not a great deal, because these causes are rare to begin with.

If these hypotheses are restated as theories of misperception, to become Type IV Realist hypotheses—for example, “war is more likely when states *believe* that conquest is easy”—they acquire great explanatory and prescriptive power. As noted above, the misperceptions they identify are common, hence they explain a sizable amount of history. These misperceptions are also more manipulable than power realities. Thus Type IV Realism is the most useful of the four Realisms.

In sum, this book both faults and repairs Realism. It faults Realism for failing to explain war and to prescribe solutions, and repairs it by offering Realist hypotheses that fill these gaps . . .

## Notes

- 1 A survey of writings on war prevention from the fourteenth century through World War I is F. H. Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. 13–149.
- 2 The Columbia University graduate school of political science was founded in 1880 by John Burgess, who had vowed during an 1863 battle that if he survived he would devote his life to the search for peace. See John W. Burgess, *Reminiscences of an American Scholar* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934), pp. 28–29, 69, 86, 141, 197.
- 3 Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (1939; New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 8.
- 4 The best recent review of hypotheses on the causes of war is Jack S. Levy, “The Causes of War: A Review of Theories and Evidence,” in Philip E. Tetlock, Jo L. Husbands, Robert Jervis, Paul C. Stern, and Charles Tilly, eds., *Behavior, Society, and Nuclear War*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, 1991), 1: 209–333; updated by Levy, “The Causes of War and the Conditions of Peace,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 1998, 1: 139–65. As Levy notes (1989, 1991, p. 212), other surveys of hypotheses on the causes of war are few, and none are really comprehensive. Other useful surveys include Greg Cashman, *What Causes War? An Introduction to Theories of International Conflict* (New York: Lexington Books, 1993); Seyom Brown, *The Causes and Prevention of War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987); and Keith Nelson and

Spencer C. Olin, Jr., *Why War? Ideology, Theory, and History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979). Valuable older surveys include the classic Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959); and Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (New York: Free Press, 1973). Shorter surveys include T. C. W. Blanning, *The Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars* (London: Longman, 1986), pp. 1–35; and Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 276–340. A partial survey and application is John Lewis Gaddis, “The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Postwar International System,” *International Security* 10 (Spring 1986): 99–142. Collections of theoretical writings include Robert I. Rotberg and Theodore K. Rabb, eds., *The Origins and Prevention of Major Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Richard A. Falk and Samuel S. Kim, eds., *The War System: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Boulder: Westview, 1980); Manus I. Midlarsky, ed., *Handbook of War Studies* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989); Leon Bramson and George W. Goethals, *War: Studies from Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1968); John A. Vasquez and Marie T. Hennehan, eds., *The Scientific Study of Peace and War: A Text Reader* (New York: Lexington Books, 1992); and Charles W. Kegley, Jr., ed., *The Long Postwar Peace: Contending Explanations and Predictions* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

- 5 Concurring, A. F. K. Organski and Jacek Kugler lamented in 1980 that “despite the vast literature devoted to war, little is known on the subject that is of practical value.” *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 13. J. David Singer offered a broader criticism of causes-of-war studies in 1986, arguing that “nothing worthy of the name has yet emerged in the way of a compelling theory of war . . . we have no adequate theory as yet.” “Research, Policy, and the Correlates of War,” in Øyvind Østerud, ed., *Studies of War and Peace* (Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1986), pp. 44–58 at 50–51. Jack S. Levy likewise concluded in 1983 that “our understanding of war remains at an elementary level. No widely accepted theory of the causes of war exists and little agreement has emerged on the methodology through which these causes might be discovered.” *War in the Modern Great Power System, 1495–1975* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), p. 1.
- 6 Paul Nitze states a common view among policymakers: “Most of what has been written and taught under the heading of ‘political science’ by Americans since World War II has been . . . of limited value, if not counterproductive, as a guide to the actual conduct of policy.” *Tension Between Opposites: Reflections on the Practice and Theory of Politics* (New York: Scribner’s, 1993), p. 3.
- 7 Marc Trachtenberg notes the general dismissal of military factors as war causes by diplomatic historians, who “as a rule never paid much attention to the military side of the story. . . . We all took it for granted that war was essentially the outcome of political conflict. . . . Purely military factors, such as the desire to strike before being struck . . . were seen as playing at best a very marginal role.” *History and Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. viii.
- 8 Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 234.
- 9 Robert Keohane’s summary of the elements of the Realist paradigm aptly distills other definitions; (1) “States are the most important actors in world politics”; (2) States are “unitary rational actors, carefully calculating costs of alternative courses of action and seeking to maximize their expected utility, although doing so under conditions of uncertainty and without necessarily having sufficient information about alternatives or resources (time or otherwise) to conduct a full review of all possible courses of action”; and (3) “States seek power . . . and they calculate their interests in terms of power.” “Theory of World Politics; Structural Realism and Beyond,” in Robert O. Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 158–203 at 163–65. Stephen Walt includes a fourth element: “Realists believe that the external environment heavily shapes the foreign policies of states.” “Alliances, Threats, and U.S. Grand Strategy: A Reply to Kaufman and Labs,” *Security Studies* 1 (Spring 1992): 448–82 at 474n. Together these summaries suggest that the Realist theory family includes causes lying in the structure of international power and in misperceptions of that structure, although rather limited room is allowed for misperceptions.

Other summaries of the Realist paradigm include Michael Joseph Smith, *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), pp. 1–2; Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller, “Preface,” in Michael E. Brown, Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller, eds., *The Perils of Anarchy: Contemporary Realism and International Security* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), pp. ix–xxi at ix–x; and Benjamin Frankel, “Restating the Realist Case: An Introduction,” *Security Studies* 5 (Spring 1996): ix–xx.

Two schools of Realism are often distinguished: Classical and Neorealist (or Structural Realist). Classical Realism is associated with the writings of Hans J. Morgenthau and E. H. Carr, especially Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations*, 5th ed. (1948; New York: Knopf, 1973), and Carr's *Twenty Years' Crisis*. Others in the Classical Realist tradition include Norman Graebner, John Herz, George Kennan, Henry Kissinger, Reinhold Niebuhr, Nicholas Spykman, Martin Wight, and Arnold Wolfers. A useful discussion of some of these is Smith, *Realist Thought*; see also James E. Dougherty and Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr., *Contending Theories of International Relations: A Comprehensive Survey*, 3d ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), chap. 3. Neorealism refers mainly to the work of Kenneth N. Waltz, especially his *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979). Others in the Neorealist tradition include John Mearsheimer and John Lewis Gaddis. A collection of assessments of Neorealism is Keohane, *Neorealism and Its Critics*. The two schools differ on two main issues: (1) What causes conflict: human nature (Classical Realists) or the anarchic nature of the international system (Neorealists)? (2) What is the prime goal of states: power (Classical Realists) or security (Neorealists)?

- 10 Morgenthau identified two roots of conflict: the human desire for power and the desire for scarce goods. Beyond this he said little. His *Politics among Nations* has no extended discussion of the causes of war—there is no entry for “war, causes of” in the index—although it implies many hypotheses. A summary of Morgenthau is Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory,” in Rotberg and Rabb, *Origins and Prevention of Major Wars*, pp. 39–52 at 40–41. Carr's *Twenty Years' Crisis* advances one main hypothesis on war's causes: that the risk of war is greater when strong states enjoy less privilege than their power would allow them to seize or defend. This risk, he argues, can be reduced by granting greater rights to underprivileged states. See *Twenty Years' Crisis*, chap. 13. Carr's argument, essentially a brief for appeasement, was toned down after the book's first edition (1939). For the passages omitted from later editions see Smith, *Realist Thought*, pp. 83–84. Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* advances one prime hypothesis: the risk of war is greater in a multipolar world than in a bipolar one.
- 11 Arguing that Realist theories have failed empirical tests is Stephen A. Kocs, “Explaining the Strategic Behavior of States: International Law as System Structure,” *International Studies Quarterly* 38 (1994): 535–56 at 548–49.
- 12 Keohane, “Theory of World Politics,” pp. 198–99. For these reasons Keohane finds Realism morally objectionable: “Realism sometimes seems to imply, pessimistically, that order can *only* be created by hegemony,” a conclusion that is “morally unacceptable” since it leaves the danger of nuclear war unaddressed. “No serious thinker could, therefore, be satisfied with Realism as the correct theory of world politics, even if the scientific status of the theory were stronger than it is.” Instead “we need to focus . . . on variables that to some extent can be manipulated by human action” (ibid.).

Realist writings are not wholly devoid of prescriptions for war prevention. Morgenthau offers sensible advice for the conduct of diplomacy, and Carr recommends appeasement. See Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, pp. 540–48; and Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, pp. 208–23. However, Keohane is correct that Realism is generally pessimistic about the preventability of war, and offers few prescriptions.

- 13 For example, John Mearsheimer, an archetypal Neorealist, argues that “conflict is common among states because the international system creates powerful incentives for aggression.” “Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War,” *International Security* 15 (Summer 1990): 5–56 at 12. As Robert Gilpin notes, Mearsheimer's view is common among Realists. Many hold that international anarchy compels the state “to expand its power and attempt to extend its control over the international system”; states that do otherwise suffer “severe penalties.” *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 86. An attack on this view is Charles L. Glaser, “Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help,” *International Security* 19 (Winter 1994/95): 50–90.
- 14 See notes [9] and [10], above.
- 15 My Realist categories are not mutually exclusive, and many scholars fall in several Realist camps at the same time. Thus Kenneth Waltz, the prime exemplar of Type II Realism, has also endorsed Type III Realist ideas (on these see below) in his post-1979 writings, and John Mearsheimer endorses both Types II and III ideas. See, for example, Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better*, Adelphi Papers no. 171 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981), pp. 5–6; Waltz, “Origins of War,” p. 50; Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future,” pp. 13–20. However, there is some degree of clustering around one worldview or the other.

Most Type I and Type II Realists who endorsed Type III ideas did so rather slowly and not very strongly.

- 16 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 161–76. Concurring are Gaddis, “Long Peace,” pp. 105–10; and Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future,” pp. 13–19, 21–29.
- 17 Discussing literature on both sides of this question is Levy, “Causes of War,” pp. 232–35.
- 18 Discussing literature on both sides of this question is Levy, “Causes of War,” pp. 231–32, 240–43. See also, arguing for the peacefulness of equality, Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future,” pp. 18–19; and arguing the opposite, Blainey, *Causes of War*, pp. 109–14.

Some Type II realists pay some attention to misperceptions of the gross structure of power as a war cause. See, for example, Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 168; Waltz argues that miscalculations of the gross balance of power are more likely in a multipolar world, and such miscalculations raise the risk of war. This suggests a third class of Type II realism (Type IIC), which addresses the causes and effects of misperceptions of the gross structure of power. However, misperceptions are a minor theme in Type II realist writings, hence Type IIC is a minor current relative to Types IIA and IIB.

- 19 Type III Realist ideas began developing in the 1960s and 1970s, but these ideas have not been located in the Realist paradigm by their authors, by other Realists, or by critics of Realism. The 1986 exchange on Neorealism in Keohane, *Neorealism and Its Critics*, illustrates this point, neither proponents nor opponents of Realism mentioned Type III ideas except in a very brief aside (p. 175). Realists nevertheless can be distinguished by their views of Type III Realist ideas. Most important, we can distinguish offensive Realists, who think conquest is easy and security is scarce, from defensive Realists, who think conquest is difficult and security is abundant. A discussion of these schools is Frankel, “Restating the Realist Case,” pp. xv–xviii.

# Realists as optimists

## Cooperation as self-help

*Charles L. Glaser*

From: *International Security* 19 (Winter 1994/95): 50–90.

Structural realists are pessimistic about the prospects for international cooperation; they believe that competition between the major powers in the international system is the normal state of affairs. The structural-realist argument is driven by the implications of international anarchy, that is, the lack of an international authority capable of enforcing agreements. Responding to the pressures of anarchy, during peacetime countries will be inclined to deal with adversaries by arms racing and gaining allies, rather than by cooperating via arms control or other approaches for realizing common interests. Anarchy discourages cooperation because it requires states to worry about the relative gains of cooperation and the possibility that adversaries will cheat on agreements. In short, the standard structural-realist argument predicts that cooperation between adversaries, while not impossible, will be difficult to achieve and, as a result, will be rare and contribute relatively little to states' well-being . . .<sup>1</sup>

I argue that this pessimism is unwarranted. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the strong general propensity for adversaries to compete is not an inevitable logical consequence of structural realism's basic assumptions. Structural realism properly understood predicts that, under a wide range of conditions, adversaries can best achieve their security goals through cooperative policies, not competitive ones, and should, therefore, choose cooperation when these conditions prevail.

This article focuses on states' military-policy options during peacetime. In this context, "cooperation" refers to coordinated policies designed to avoid arms races,<sup>2</sup> while competition refers to unilateral military buildups, which are likely to generate arms races, and to alliance formation.<sup>3</sup>

The implications of my reevaluation are not limited to peacetime policies, however. Adversaries find peacetime cooperation desirable because it enables them to moderate causes of war that already exist or to avoid competition that would intensify causes of war. Consequently, beyond being more optimistic about the prospects for peacetime cooperation, my alternative structural-realist analysis, which I label *contingent realism*, is also more optimistic about the likelihood of avoiding war than is the standard structural-realist analysis . . .

### Contingent realism

. . . My contingent-realist analysis develops three lines of argument. First, it eliminates the unwarranted bias toward competition that exists in the standard argument. Second, to capture more faithfully the logic that flows from structural realism's basic assumptions, contingent realism focuses on military capabilities—the ability to perform military

missions—instead of on power.<sup>4</sup> This is accomplished by more fully integrating the security dilemma into structural realism. Third, contingent realism recognizes that the rational-actor assumptions that form the foundation of structural realism allow states to use military policy to communicate information about their motives. As a result, states seeking security should see benefits in cooperative policies that can communicate benign motives.

### *Eliminating the “competition” bias*

The standard argument focuses on the risks of cooperation; by underplaying and overlooking the risks of competition, it contains an unwarranted bias toward competition. The bias is the result of several mistakes. First, although the standard argument equates self-help with pursuit of competitive policies, in fact cooperative policies are an important type of self-help. For example, an adversary will engage in reciprocal restraint only if arms control promises to provide it with greater security than the competitive alternatives; this is possible only if the adversary believes that an arms race would be risky. Consequently, a country gets an adversary to cooperate by relying on its own resources—through self-help—since the country’s ability to engage in an arms race is a central condition for its adversary’s belief that arms racing is risky, and thus for its willingness to cooperate. Thus, by itself, self-help tells us essentially nothing about whether states should prefer cooperation or competition.

Second, although the standard argument is correct in maintaining that the desire to avoid losses of capability and to gain military advantages can force states to compete, it is also true that this desire can lead states to cooperate. If military advantages are extremely valuable, then military disadvantages can be extremely dangerous. Therefore, when uncertain about the outcome of an arms race, which it would like to win, a risk-averse state could prefer an arms control agreement that accepted the current military status quo to gambling on prevailing in the arms race.<sup>5</sup> In addition, countries can prefer cooperation even when they are sure that they would not lose the arms race. For example, a country concerned about maintaining its military capabilities could prefer arms control when an arms race would result in advances in weapons technology that, when deployed by both countries, would have the unfortunate effect of leaving both countries more vulnerable to attack. And a country could prefer arms control when equal increases in the size of forces might decrease, not increase, its ability to defend itself.<sup>6</sup> The central message of modern arms control theory is that under certain conditions *both* countries could prefer these kinds of cooperation.<sup>7</sup>

Third, although it is correct in stating that uncertainty about the adversary’s motives creates reasons for a state to compete, the standard argument fails to recognize that uncertainty about motives also creates powerful reasons for states to cooperate. Each faces uncertainty about the other’s motives; such uncertainty is dangerous because it can fuel insecurity, which structural realism identifies as the key source of international conflict. This generates two reasons for a state to cooperate. Even if cooperation leaves the adversary’s uncertainty about a state’s motives unchanged, cooperation is valuable if it reduces the adversary’s insecurity by reducing the military threat it faces. Moreover, cooperation is valuable if it can reduce the adversary’s uncertainty, convincing it that the first state is motivated more by insecurity than by greed; this would further reduce the probability of conflict caused by an opponent’s insecurity. The benefits of competition, specifically gaining military advantages, must be weighed against these benefits of cooperation. This tradeoff lies at the core of the security dilemma, is a central component of structural realism, and cannot be generally resolved in favor of competition.



In sum, eliminating the bias in the standard structural-realist argument shows that states face a variety of countervailing pressures for cooperation as well as competition. Nothing in the basic structural-realist argument resolves these tradeoffs in general in favor of competition. The standard argument stresses only the risks of cooperation, but both cooperation and competition can be risky. Launching an arms buildup can make the adversary more insecure and, therefore, harder to deter. Pursuing military advantages forgoes [*sic*] the possibility of avoiding an arms race in which the state could fall temporarily or permanently behind. When the risks of competition exceed the risks of cooperation, states should direct their self-help efforts toward achieving cooperation. Thus, contingent realism makes it clear that we need to replace essentially unconditional predictions of competition with conditional predictions of when states should cooperate and when they should compete.

***Shifting the focus from power to military capabilities: bringing in considerations of offense and defense***

A security-seeking state that is comparing competition and cooperation must confront two fundamental questions. First, which will contribute more to its military capabilities for deterring attack, and for defending if deterrence fails? Second, appreciating the pressures created by anarchy and insecurity, the state should ask which approach is best for avoiding capabilities that threaten others' abilities to defend and deter, while not undermining its military capabilities? The tension that can exist between these two objectives lies at the core of the security dilemma.

*Why reformulation is necessary.* According to the standard structural-realist argument, states evaluate their ability to achieve security in terms of power.<sup>8</sup> Great powers are defined in terms of aggregate resources, including size of population, economic and industrial assets, and military assets. Power is defined in terms of the distribution of these resources among the states in the system. States seeking security endeavor to maintain their position in the system, and therefore they seek to maintain their relative resource rankings.<sup>9</sup>

This formulation is problematic because, as noted above, security-seeking states should assess their military requirements in terms of their ability to perform necessary military missions and to forgo the ability to perform certain other missions. Considerations of power do influence the answers to these questions, but they only begin to tell the story. For example, under certain conditions, two equally powerful states might have good prospects for defending against each other, while under other conditions their prospects for defending successfully could be relatively poor.

To shift from a structural theory based on power to one based on military capabilities and strategy, we need to include the dimensions of the security dilemma—the offense–defense balance and offense–defense distinguishability—as key variables. The offense–defense balance determines how much military-mission capability a country can get from its power; more specifically, for a country with a given amount of power, including the offense–defense balance in our analysis improves our ability to evaluate the country's prospects for defending itself. The offense–defense balance can be defined in terms of the investment in forces that support offensive missions that an opponent must make to offset a defender's investment in forces that support defensive missions. Defense enjoys a larger advantage when the required investment in offense is larger. The offense–defense balance is the ratio of the cost of the offensive forces to the cost of the defensive forces . . .<sup>10</sup>

Including offense–defense distinguishability in our analysis enables us to consider whether states can choose to convert their power into different types of military capability,

specifically, offensive or defensive-mission capability. When offense and defense are completely distinguishable, the forces that support offensive missions do not support defensive missions, and vice versa; when offense and defense are not at all distinguishable, the forces that support offensive missions can be used as effectively in defensive missions. Therefore, the extent to which military power can be disaggregated, making offense and defense distinguishable, is important for answering a key question—whether defenders can avoid having offensive-mission capabilities while maintaining defensive ones . . .

*Implications of variation in the dimensions of the security dilemma.* Under what conditions should security-seeking states find cooperative policies to be desirable and feasible?<sup>11</sup> The types of policies that states can choose from depend on whether the forces required to support offensive strategies are distinguishable from those required to support defensive strategies. If they are distinguishable, then states can choose to build offense, defense, or both; they can also engage in arms control to limit offensive forces, defensive forces, or both. Given these choices, three approaches for gaining security are especially interesting: cooperation via arms control; unilateral defense, that is, deploying defensive forces independent of the strategy one's adversary chooses; and arms racing.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, if offense and defense are indistinguishable, the basic choice facing states is whether to build larger forces, and risk generating an arms race, or to pursue arms control that reduces or caps the size of their forces.<sup>13</sup>

Arms control can be especially useful when the forces that support offensive missions can be distinguished from forces that support defensive missions.<sup>14</sup> If they can be distinguished, then agreements can restrict offensive capabilities by limiting specific types of forces; both countries will have better defensive capabilities and appear less threatening than if they had both deployed offensive forces.

Whether arms control is the preferred policy will vary with the offense–defense balance. When defense has a large advantage, arms control will be largely unnecessary. Countries can instead pursue unilateral defense, choosing to deploy defensive forces independent of whether their adversaries do. Even if one country decides to pursue offense, the competition should be mild due to the advantage of the defense. Two countries motivated primarily by security are both likely to choose unilateral defense, resulting in even less intense military competition.

In contrast, if offense has an advantage over defense, arms control has far more to contribute. Limiting offensive weapons while allowing defensive ones would establish a military status quo in which both countries are better able to defend themselves and in which first-strike incentives are smaller than if the countries invested primarily in offensive forces.<sup>15</sup> Arms control would likely be necessary to avoid this emphasis on offensive forces and on the arms race that could ensue, since both countries would find it difficult, technically or economically, to counter the adversary's offense with defense. Beyond improving the military status quo, arms control could help avoid some of the “dynamic” risks that an arms race itself could generate. When defense does not have the advantage, falling temporarily behind in a race, which creates a “window” of disadvantage, becomes more dangerous . . .<sup>16</sup>

When the forces required for offensive and defensive missions are not distinguishable, arms control is less clearly useful. Agreements that limit the size of forces may leave offensive and defensive capabilities essentially unchanged, in which case they would have little effect on a country's ability to deter.<sup>17</sup> In contrast to the case in which offense and defense are distinguishable, arms control cannot promise to improve the military status quo. However, this observation applies equally to arms racing: competition that increases the size

of the countries' forces may not increase their deterrent capabilities. Thus, when offense and defense are indistinguishable, there is no general conclusion about whether states should prefer arms control or arms racing. To analyze specific cases, states would have to perform net assessments of the variation in mission capability as a function of force size . . .<sup>18</sup>

In sum, adding offense–defense variables does not shift the basic emphasis of structural theories, but instead eliminates distortions that result when the theory is cast primarily in terms of power. Considering not just power, but also how much and what types of military capability a state can produce with its power, is essential for understanding the pressures and opportunities that countries face when seeking security in an anarchic system. Given this formulation, a country's concern about its military capabilities should lead it to reject competitive policies under a range of conditions. In fact, contrary to the standard structural-realist analysis, arms racing is only clearly preferred to less competitive policies under rather narrow conditions: when offense has the advantage and is indistinguishable from defense, and when the risks of being cheated exceed the risks of arms racing.

### *Incorporating motives and intentions: military policy and signaling*

A state seeking security should be concerned about whether its adversary understands that its motivations are benign. Uncertainty about the state's motives, or even worse, the incorrect belief that the state is motivated by greed rather than security concerns, will increase the adversary's insecurity, which in turn will reduce the state's own security. Thus, structural realism suggests that states should be very interested in demonstrating that their motives are benign. The problem, according to the standard formulation, is that states acting within the constraints imposed by the international structure cannot communicate information about motives;<sup>19</sup> this type of information is seen as available only at the unit level.

Here again, however, the conventional wisdom is flawed. The rational actors posited by structural realism can under certain conditions communicate information about their motives by manipulating their military policies.<sup>20</sup>

Because greedy states have an incentive to misrepresent their motives, a pure security seeker can communicate information about its motives only by adopting a policy that is less costly for it than it would be for a greedy state.<sup>21</sup> A greedy state would like to mislead its adversaries into believing that it is interested only in security, since its adversaries would then be more likely to pursue policies that leave them vulnerable, enabling the greedy state to meet its expansionist objectives. However, when the policies that indicate that a state is not greedy are more costly for greedy states than for pure security seekers, greedy states are less likely to adopt them. Consequently, by adopting such a policy a state can communicate information about which type of state it is, that is, about its motives.

States can try to communicate their benign intentions via three types of military policies: arms control, unilateral defense, and unilateral restraint.<sup>22</sup> Agreeing to limit offensive capabilities, when offense has the advantage, can shift the adversary's assessment of the state's motives. Although a greedy state might accept this arms control agreement, because limits on its adversary's offense would increase its security, the agreement is costly for a greedy state because it reduces its prospects for expansion. Thus, although both states that are pure security-seekers and states that are motivated [*sic*] by greed as well as security might accept such an agreement, the costs of agreement are higher for the greedy state; moreover, the greedier the state was, the less likely it would be to accept the agreement. Consequently, although accepting the arms agreement should not entirely convince the adversary that it does not face a greedy state, it does nevertheless provide valuable information. By

comparison, agreeing to limit offense when defense has the advantage provides less information, since an arms race is less likely to make expansion possible. Consequently, a greedy state would find such an agreement less costly, narrowing the cost-differential between greedy and non-greedy states, and thus limiting the information conveyed by such a policy.

Agreeing to limit the size of forces when offense and defense are indistinguishable can also communicate information about motives. Assuming that both countries have some chance of gaining an offensive military advantage in the race, the costs of accepting limits on force size will be greater for greedier states. The clearest signal will come from a state that has good prospects for winning the race, but nevertheless agrees to some form of parity . . .

Finally, a country can try to communicate benign motives by employing unilateral restraint—that is, by reducing its military capability below the level it believes would otherwise be necessary for deterrence and defense.<sup>23</sup> This should send a clear message for two reasons: the state has reduced its offensive capability, which a greedy state would be less likely to do; and the state has incurred some risk, due to the shortfall in military capabilities, which the adversary could interpret as a further indication of the value the state places on improving relations. Of course, this security risk will make states reluctant to adopt an ambitious policy of unilateral restraint. Consequently, states are likely to turn to unilateral restraint only when other options are precluded, e.g., when unilateral defense is impossible because offense and defense are indistinguishable, or when it is unaffordable, because offense has a large advantage over defense, or when they conclude that an especially dramatic gesture is necessary . . .

### **Implications for structural-realist arguments**

Contingent realism has a number of implications for the study and application of structural theories. First, because contingent realism predicts cooperation under certain conditions and competition under others, a structural-realist case against cooperation must demonstrate that the conditions necessary for cooperation have not occurred or will not occur in the future. This empirical assessment should be a key component of the argument explaining the prevalence of international competition. However, the standard structural-realist case about the competitive nature of international politics has not been built on this type of evidence.<sup>24</sup> These arguments are therefore incomplete; whether their conclusions are nevertheless correct remains an open question.

Second, development of an improved structural-realist baseline improves our ability to explore the value of alternative explanations for competitive and cooperative policies.<sup>25</sup> For example, since contingent realism predicts cooperation in certain cases, alternative and complementary explanations for cooperation—for example, institutions and regimes—could become less compelling. On the other hand, in cases where contingent realism predicts extensive cooperation but little occurs, other theories that explain competition become more important. A variety of important possibilities have received extensive attention—for example, that greedy motives, in addition to insecurity, make cooperation less likely if not impossible, and that a variety of individual and state-level misperceptions could lead countries to pursue undesirable competition.<sup>26</sup> Our ability to compare the explanatory strength of these theories depends on having established a structural-realist baseline that explains cooperation, as well as competition, and the conditions under which each is predicted.

Third, because contingent realism identifies countervailing pressures, it will, at least

sometimes, not clearly prescribe either competitive or cooperative policies. In these cases, other levels of analysis will necessarily play a more important role in explaining state behavior. Structural pressures will bound the possibilities, while leaving states with substantial choice between more cooperative and more competitive approaches. Although the levels-of-analysis debate is often viewed as a competition between different levels of explanation, this argument suggests that they are often necessarily complementary. A related point focuses on implications for policy analysis: when structural arguments do not provide clear guidance, the choice between cooperative and competitive policies could hinge on the anticipated effects of various policy options on the opponent's domestic politics.<sup>27</sup>

Fourth, contrary to what appears to be the conventional wisdom, structural realism, properly understood, has more trouble explaining the competitive military policies the superpowers pursued during the latter half of the Cold War than it does explaining the less competitive policies that have followed it. Because structural realism is commonly understood to predict highly competitive international relations, the end of the Cold War was interpreted as a severe defeat for structural-realist theories and as a boost for unit-level, country-specific theories. For the same reason, some analysts argued that even the limited cooperation that did occur during the Cold War could not easily be explained by structural realism.<sup>28</sup> Others argued that the limited contribution of arms control to slowing the superpowers' military buildups and reducing the probability of war provides support for the standard structural-realist claim that cooperation can play only a marginal role in major powers' security policies.<sup>29</sup>

However, contingent realism suggests that it is the competition that occurred during the latter half of the Cold War that poses the more serious challenge to structural realism properly understood. The security dilemma facing the United States and Soviet Union was greatly reduced, if not entirely eliminated, by the superpowers' acquisition of assured destruction capabilities, which appeared virtually certain to occur by the mid-1960s at the latest: the superpowers' deployment of large survivable nuclear arsenals established clear defense-dominance, and the technology of nuclear weapon delivery systems and various types of offensive counterforce provided the opportunity to distinguish offense and defense.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, bipolarity reduced the complexity of the arms control agreements that were required to slow competition. Under these conditions, instead of a marginal role, contingent realism predicts a major role for arms control or other non-competitive policies. The nuclear arms race should have ground to a halt and the full spectrum of the most threatening nuclear forces should have been limited either by arms control agreements or unilaterally. Thus, rather than providing support, the continuing military competition cuts against structural realism and must be explained by other theories . . .

A fifth implication of contingent realism is that, contrary to the standard interpretation, structural-realist analysis offers generally optimistic predictions about the future of conflict between Europe's major powers. For example, because states pursue security, not advantages in relative power, structural realism does not predict that the West will try to take advantage of current Russian weakness . . .

Finally, this analysis also indicates a likely source of tension. Current nuclear powers will face conflicting pressures if other major or intermediate powers—most obviously, Germany and Ukraine—decide they need nuclear weapons. On the one hand, structural arguments hold that the nuclear powers should welcome the security that nuclear weapons can provide to other major powers. On the other hand, the acquisition of nuclear capabilities will reduce the ability of current nuclear powers to deter conventional attacks, or at least their confidence in their abilities,<sup>31</sup> and might increase the damage they would suffer if war occurs. At least

initially, therefore, proliferation is likely to be an unwelcome change and to strain relations in Europe. Fortunately, there is a readily available solution for avoiding these strains in the case of Germany. Preserving NATO, and thereby U.S. security guarantees to Germany, should essentially eliminate Germany's need for nuclear weapons.<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, there is no comparable solution for Ukraine's security requirements.<sup>33</sup>

In closing, contingent realism paints a picture that diverges dramatically from that offered by the standard structural-realist argument. Instead of a strong propensity toward security competition, we find that states' choices between cooperation and competition are highly conditional, with no general preference for competition. This conclusion flows from the same assumptions that are employed in the standard structural-realist analysis. However, by eliminating the bias in that analysis, integrating offense–defense considerations to determine how much and what types of military capability countries can generate from their power, and explaining how military policies can signal valuable information about motives, contingent realism corrects a variety of shortcomings. It provides a set of conditional structural-realist predictions that improve our ability to explore past cooperation and competition, are necessary for assessing competing explanations, and provide better guidance for designing future policies.

## Notes

- 1 Structural realists are sometimes referred to as neorealists. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979) remains the most important statement of these arguments. Some authors want to reserve “neorealism” to refer to the theory as articulated by Waltz, while using structural realism to refer to a broader family of systemic theories; see Barry Buzan, Charles Jones and Richard Little, *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). In this essay, I use “structural realist” as an ideal type—an analyst who believes that only international or systemic-level factors influence international politics. I recognize, however, that virtually all structural realists actually believe that other levels of analysis have some influence.
- 2 In other contexts, cooperation can refer to decisions to make concessions during a crisis and to decisions to forgo launching a war. Cooperation—including both formal and informal reciprocated restraint—is not the only alternative to competitive policies. Uncoordinated but unthreatening, and therefore uncompetitive, policies can sometimes be a second key alternative. For example, if defensive forces have an advantage over offensive forces, then countries could choose defense, independent of others' choices.
- 3 I consider alliance formation to be a type of competition because, although the allies are cooperating with each other, they are competing with a common adversary. Since balancing in the form of alliance formation is probably the most prominent and widely accepted prediction of structural realism, the standard pessimism about cooperation presumably does not count alliances as cooperation. The key questions about cooperation therefore focus on cooperation between adversaries. However, because today's ally could be an adversary in the future, the line between allies and adversaries is not always sharp, and under certain conditions concern about relative gains could inhibit cooperation between allies.
- 4 To avoid confusion, I stress that the term “military capabilities” refers to the capability to perform military missions. Some authors use “military capabilities” to refer to military forces, that is, as a measure of the forces a country has deployed, not as a measure of the ability of forces to perform missions against an adversary's forces. As an example of the former use, Waltz explains that “capabilities are attributes of units [states]” and he includes “military strength” among the components of overall capability; Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 98, 131. The distinction is very important because a state's ability to perform military missions is not determined by the size, type, and quality of its own military forces or resources, but by how these resources compare with and would fight against the adversary's forces.
- 5 Doubts about the outcome of the race could reflect uncertainties about which country is wealthier, better able to extract resources for military purposes, or better able to develop and exploit military technologies.



- 6 Moreover, the choice of arms racing over cooperation must compare arms racing not only to the military status quo but also to the possibility that reductions from the status quo might improve capabilities. Of course, the choice between arms racing, arms control and allies will also be influenced by domestic factors. For example, a country might prefer to avoid an arms race, which would not reduce its security, simply to avoid the economic costs of further arming. On domestic factors in the choice between arming and allies, see James D. Morrow, "Arms Versus Allies: Tradeoffs in the Search For Security," *International Organization*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (Spring 1993), pp. 207–233.
- 7 See Thomas C. Schelling and Morton H. Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1961); and Donald G. Brennan, ed., *Arms Control, Disarmament and National Security* (New York: George Braziller, 1961). Thomas C. Schelling, "A Framework for the Evaluation of Arms-Control Proposals," *Daedalus*, Vol. 104, No. 3 (Summer 1975), pp. 187–200, explores the implications of a country's preferences for an arms race, an unmatched unilateral buildup, or the military status quo.
- 8 We need to be clear on whether power is a "relational concept" defined in terms of the ability to influence another's actions, or a "property concept," something that can be defined and measured without reference to other countries. See David A. Baldwin, *Economic Statecraft* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), esp. pp. 18–24. I am using "power" as a relational concept, which is consistent with Waltz, who defines power in terms of the *distribution* of capabilities (by which he means resources) in *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 98, 192. However, "power" is often used to refer to a state's resources, in which case assessments of influence need to be cast in terms of relative power.
- 9 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 131, 98, 192, and 126; Joseph M. Grieco, *Cooperation Among Nations: Europe, America and Non-tariff Barriers to Trade* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 10, 39–40. What I am referring to as resources, Waltz refers to as capabilities; see note 4 for why I avoid using "capabilities."
- 10 Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (January 1978), p. 188; on the variety of definitions of the offense–defense balance and potential problems that this creates see Jack S. Levy, "The Offense/Defense Balance of Military Technology: A Theoretical and Historical Analysis," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Spring 1990), pp. 222–230.
- 11 The following discussion assumes that states motivated primarily by security would prefer situations in which all countries lack effective offensive capabilities to situations in which all countries have effective offensive capabilities. However, pure security seekers might see some benefits in offensive capabilities under a variety of circumstances. For example, offense might contribute to deterrence by providing the capability to credibly threaten a punishing counter-offensive, might enhance the country's ability to defend its territory by providing the capability to regain lost territory, and might enable a declining state to insure its security by launching a preventive war. These benefits would have to be weighed against the dangers of increasing the adversary's insecurity. In addition, given the choice of both states having or both lacking offense, each state needs to consider the dangers posed by an increase in the adversary's offensive capability. On factors that influence this choice see Stephen Van Evera, "Offense, Defense, and Strategy"; Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 67–71; and Charles L. Glaser, "Political Consequences of Military Strategy: Expanding and Refining the Spiral and Deterrence Models," *World Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (July 1992).
- 12 Unilateral defense has much in common with cooperative policies in that it does not threaten the adversary's security, and usually will not generate threatening reactions from an adversary motivated primarily by security. However, pursuit of unilateral defense is not cooperation because the defender can productively pursue unilateral defense without coordinating with the adversary. Unilateral defensive policies therefore reflect a situation of harmony, not cooperation; see Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 51–55.
- 13 To simplify the discussion, I do not address qualitative arms control that limits technological innovation.
- 14 Robert Jervis, "Security Regimes," *International Organization*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Spring 1982), p. 362, comments on some of the following points.
- 15 On the dangers of offense see Stephen Van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War," *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Summer 1984), pp. 58–107.
- 16 On windows see Stephen W. Van Evera, "Causes of War" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of

- California, Berkeley, 1984), esp. chap. 2; and Charles L. Glaser, *Analyzing Strategic Nuclear Policy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 150–155.
- 17 This depends on whether the the [*sic*] offense–defense balance varies with the size of deployed forces. To see that it can, consider the deterrence requirements of nuclear forces, or force-to-space requirements of conventional forces designed to defeat breakthrough battles.
  - 18 However, even when larger forces are desirable, it is unclear that states should prefer truly competitive policies. One alternative is simply to coordinate increases in force size up to but not above a level at which both countries believe their deterrent capabilities would be enhanced.
  - 19 This view plays a central role in Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics,” *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Spring 1992), pp. 391 and 392.
  - 20 For formal treatments that focus on this possibility see George W. Downs and David M. Rocke, *Tacit Bargaining, Arms Races, and Arms Control* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), chap. 4; and Andrew Kydd, “The Security Dilemma, Game Theory, and WWI,” paper presented at the 1993 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association. See also Robert Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970); and Jervis, “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma.”
  - 21 On “costly signals,” see James Dana Fearon, “Threats to Use Force: Costly Signals and Bargaining in International Crises” (PhD. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1992).
  - 22 See also Glaser, “Political Consequences of Military Strategy.”
  - 23 The uses of unilateral restraint are emphasized by Charles E. Osgood, *An Alternative to War or Surrender* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1962). In *Tacit Bargaining, Arms Races and Arms Control* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), pp. 41–51, Downs and David M. Rocke assess Osgood’s arguments.
  - 24 Nevertheless, the debate over the competitive policies that preceded World War I can be read from this perspective with Scott D. Sagan, “1914 Revisited: Allies, Offense, and Instability,” *International Security*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Fall 1986), pp. 151–176, arguing the greater explanatory power of structural explanations, and Van Evera, “The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War,” and Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), emphasizing the shortcomings.
  - 25 Noting the importance of a “rationalist baseline,” although focusing on different issues, is Fearon, “Threats to Use Force,” chap. 2.
  - 26 On individual misperceptions see Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*; on national-level explanations see Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, and Van Evera, “Causes of War.”
  - 27 On the interaction between international policy and domestic politics see Peter Gourevitch, “The Second Image Reversed: The International Sources of Domestic Politics,” *International Organization*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Autumn 1978); Jack Snyder, “International Leverage on Soviet Domestic Change,” *World Politics*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (October 1989), pp. 1–30; and Glaser, “Political Consequences of Military Strategy,” pp. 519–525.
  - 28 For example, Steve Weber, “Realism, Detente and Nuclear Weapons,” *International Organization*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Winter 1990).
  - 29 See, for example, John J. Mearsheimer, “Correspondence: Back to the Future, Part II: International Relations Theory and Post-Cold War Europe” *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Fall 1990), p. 197, footnote 6; in disagreeing with Mearsheimer on this point I do not intend to endorse the position he is arguing against—that institutions necessarily play a major role in security cooperation.
  - 30 This conclusion depends on judgments about U.S. requirements for counterforce to extend deterrence and on implications for the security dilemma facing the United States. See Glaser, *Analyzing Strategic Nuclear Policy*, pp. 94–99, 207–256.
  - 31 The argument here follows the logic of the stability–instability paradox. There is, however, a sound argument that nuclear powers should not be very worried about their ability to deter; see Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 19–22.
  - 32 I present the case for NATO in Glaser, “Why NATO is Still Best: Future Security Arrangements for Europe,” *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Summer 1993), pp. 5–50.
  - 33 For competing views on Ukrainian proliferation see John J. Mearsheimer, “The Case for a Ukrainian Nuclear Deterrent,” and Steven E. Miller, “The Case Against a Ukrainian Nuclear Deterrent,” both in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (Summer 1993), pp. 50–66 and 67–80.

# Breaking out of the security dilemma

## Realism, reassurance, and the problem of uncertainty

*Evan Braden Montgomery*

From: *International Security* 31, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 151–85.

In an anarchic international system with no overarching sovereign, can great powers overcome uncertainty and establish trust, or does the possibility that others hold aggressive motives inevitably lead to fear, competition, and conflict? Are nonaggressive powers capable of revealing their preferences and proving to others that their foremost goal is security? Can these states discover whether potential adversaries are similarly benign or instead greedy, motivated by nonsecurity goals such as the desire to enhance prestige or spread a particular ideology? If offense and defense are distinguishable, will benign and greedy actors be able to differentiate themselves and identify one another by the military forces they choose? Two variants of contemporary realism offer different answers to these questions.<sup>1</sup>

Offensive structural realism assumes that uncertainty is complete and invariant, as well as a determinative constraint on state behavior. Because great powers are unable to know either the present or future intentions of other actors, they are conditioned to remain fearful and maximize their relative power whenever possible. Alternatively, defensive structural realism builds on the familiar logic of the security dilemma, the situation where one state's attempts to increase its security appear threatening to others and provoke an unnecessary conflict. As a result, it places significant emphasis on factors that influence the severity of the security dilemma between states, such as military technology, geography, and estimates of adversaries' intentions and motives.<sup>2</sup>

Defensive realism's main observations indicate that hard-line policies often lead to self-defeating and avoidable consequences. If so, then conciliatory policies should have the opposite effect. Several scholars have elaborated this intuitive logic. Drawing on rational-choice deterrence theory,<sup>3</sup> cooperation theory,<sup>4</sup> and Charles Osgood's GRIT strategy,<sup>5</sup> they argue that benign states can reveal their motives, reassure potential adversaries, and avoid unnecessary conflict with costly signals—actions that greedy actors would be unwilling to take. In particular, by engaging in arms control agreements or unilateral force reductions, a security seeker can adopt a more defensive military posture and demonstrate its preference for maintaining rather than challenging the status quo.

This argument generates an obvious puzzle, however: If states can reduce uncertainty by altering their military posture, why has this form of reassurance been both uncommon and unsuccessful?<sup>6</sup> Few states, for example, have adopted defensive weapons to de-escalate an arms race or demonstrate their intentions,<sup>7</sup> and repeated efforts to restrain the Cold War competition between the United States and the Soviet Union either failed or produced strategically negligible agreements that, at least until its final years, "proved incapable of moderating the superpower rivalry in any deep or permanent way."<sup>8</sup> How can scholars and policymakers understand why states often avoid military reassurance, when they choose to undertake it, why it fails, and when it can succeed? . . .

This article critically addresses these issues and elaborates several modifications to existing realist theories. The relative paucity of empirical support indicates that states are often unwilling or unable to combat the problem of uncertainty by altering their military posture. To explain this observation, I show that attempts to incorporate reassurance into realism face several theoretical obstacles. In particular, while states can often demonstrate their intentions, the conditions under which benign actors can reveal their underlying motives without also increasing their vulnerability are significantly restricted.<sup>9</sup>

The arguments presented below build on elements of defensive realism and offense–defense theory to provide a more complete account of the disincentives, constraints, and opportunities associated with military reassurance. I argue that the primary way a benign state reveals its motives to its adversaries is by taking actions that decrease its ability to defeat them in the event of a conflict. Because greedy states prefer to expand when possible, they would rarely undermine their ability to conquer potential targets; benign states must therefore do just that so as to distinguish themselves. If offense and defense cannot be differentiated, however, reductions in a state’s ability to attack will also decrease its ability to defend, and gestures sufficient to communicate benign preferences will increase its vulnerability to possible aggressors . . .

## **Defensive realism and the limits of reassurance**

### ***. . . Causes and consequences of reassurance***

Perhaps the central dilemma of reassurance is that the very actions necessary to overcome uncertainty between security-seeking states will often leave these actors more vulnerable to greedy ones. This constraint stems from the logic of signaling and the assumptions of structural realism. The underlying logic of signaling is straightforward: “If discrete types take different actions, then observers can infer the actor’s type from its actions.”<sup>10</sup> For example, a state involved in a crisis may attempt to communicate resolve—demonstrating that it is not the type to back down—by taking steps a less determined actor would avoid, such as making public commitments or mobilizing the military.<sup>11</sup> In the context of reassurance rather than deterrence, a nonaggressive state can similarly distinguish itself by taking actions that an aggressive actor would find too costly.<sup>12</sup> Specifically, the primary way a state can reveal benign motives is by taking actions substantial enough to decrease its ability to defeat an adversary in war, if one were to occur. Because an aggressor “will be reluctant to sacrifice concrete military advantages,” a nonaggressive state must “go beyond tokens, and make concessions weighty enough so that a state contemplating attack or coercion would be unwilling to make them.”<sup>13</sup> That states must reach this threshold to prove that their motives are benign follows directly from realism’s central assumptions: because security seekers are concerned foremost with their continued survival and because they fear that other states are greedy and prefer to expand at their expense, only signals that clearly diminish a state’s ability to do so will differentiate the two types of actors.<sup>14</sup>

This suggests that, to demonstrate its motives, a benign state must take actions that will increase its vulnerability to potential adversaries or negotiate agreements that would have this effect if others did not abide by them. Although a gesture substantial enough to communicate a benign state’s preferences will reduce the probability of unnecessary conflict with other security seekers, it will also decrease its ability to fight or deter any greedy states that might choose to attack—a heightened possibility if the signaling state

appears less willing or able to defend itself. As Dale Copeland observes, “Conciliatory reassurance may reduce the probability of major war breaking out as a result of an inadvertent spiral. But by sacrificing relative power in the process, it can lower a state’s likelihood of winning any war that does occur.”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, unless offense and defense can be differentiated, a state will use the same forces for both offensive and defensive missions. Signals of reassurance large enough to decrease a state’s ability to pursue an offensive or expansionist strategy against a rival will therefore decrease its ability to defend against that rival.<sup>16</sup> This indicates that among states with comparable resources, the vulnerability of the signaling state would be greater after its attempt at reassurance than prior to it.<sup>17</sup> It is, however, this willingness to accept an increase in vulnerability that makes a signal of reassurance credible.

Small gestures that do not affect a state’s capabilities are thus likely to be discounted, and gestures sufficient to convey information are likely to be dangerous if others are in fact greedy. This presents a difficult trade-off for states attempting both to avoid unnecessary wars and to deter potential aggressors. On the one hand, the risks of continued competition may at times outweigh its benefits and provide an incentive for cooperation.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Andrew Kydd argues that, for a benign state, avoiding war with another security seeker may be worth the cost of a diminished capacity to fight off an aggressor.<sup>19</sup> Yet this cost explains why significant gestures are often anathema to states . . .

Defensive realists have addressed this fear of vulnerability both by assumption and by argument, describing signaling as a process of overcoming onesided uncertainty—situations in which the sender knows the receiver’s motives before revealing its own—and maintaining that offense–defense variables explain when reassurance can be successful as well as safe. The following subsections assess each explanation in turn.

### ***Knowing the enemy: reassurance and reduced uncertainty***

Benign states can undoubtedly communicate their preferences if they are willing to accept sufficient reductions in their capabilities, yet this may also lead to greater vulnerability. Why, then, should they choose reassurance over continued competition? The logic of defensive realism is clear: a relative decrease in a state’s capabilities can increase its security by revealing its benign motives, which will in turn reduce the adversary’s insecurity and decrease its need for aggressive policies. Facing a more secure and less hostile opponent, the first state will become more secure as well.<sup>20</sup> Glaser, for example, suggests that even a substantial, unilateral, and unreciprocated decrease in a state’s capabilities may increase its security if correctly interpreted by others as a gesture of reassurance.<sup>21</sup> This argument only holds, however, if the state’s opponent is in fact benign. If its opponent is greedy, a decrease in capabilities will have the opposite effect.

Defensive realism minimizes this dilemma by implicitly suggesting that states know others’ preferences before revealing their own; both its logic and its description of reassurance appear to reflect situations of one-sided uncertainty.<sup>22</sup> As Glaser argues, “A state seeking security should be concerned about whether its adversary understands that its motivations are benign. Uncertainty about the state’s motives, or even worse, the incorrect belief that the state is motivated by greed . . . will increase the adversary’s insecurity, which in turn will reduce the state’s own security. Thus, structural realism suggests that states should be very interested in demonstrating that their motives are benign.”<sup>23</sup> Two factors are notable here. First, reassurance is proposed as a solution to a specific problem: the adversary’s uncertainty over the state’s preferences. Second, the state presumably knows that its adversary is benign;



if the latter were greedy, the former could not increase its security by demonstrating its benign motives and would therefore have no incentive to engage in reassurance. Both factors suggest an interaction characterized by one-sided uncertainty. In this context, the signaling state will have a diminished fear of exploitation and will be more likely to take actions that clearly reveal its preferences.<sup>24</sup> Reassurance is therefore an unexplained effect of reduced uncertainty as well as a cause of it. This perspective diminishes the importance of a second problem—namely, the signaling state's own uncertainty and its need to determine the adversary's preferences.

When a state believes that its adversary seeks security, the argument for reassurance is a compelling one. By contrast, uncertainty over the other's motives and the fear it may exploit any concession often inhibit cooperation and diminish the prospects for reassurance . . .

In addition, efforts at reassurance under uncertainty will be complicated by the presence of multiple goals requiring contradictory strategies. Not only must a signaling state endeavor to reveal its benign preferences; it must also attempt to discover whether its adversary is a security seeker.<sup>25</sup> Although the first goal calls for significant gestures that will serve as adequate proof of the signaling state's motives, the second calls for smaller gestures as a test of the adversary's reaction. Yet smaller gestures will not be viewed as credible signals of reassurance and are unlikely to be reciprocated. This dilemma is nicely captured by what George Downs and David Rocke have called "the basic paradox of tacit bargaining." They write, "*A state will rarely be certain enough about an opponent's response to make a large cooperative gesture, and the opponent will rarely be trusting enough to respond enthusiastically to a small gesture.*"<sup>26</sup> Thus, even when uncertainty encourages states to engage in reassurance, it also restrains them from taking actions that will clearly reveal their preferences. Credible gestures are therefore less likely to be made when they are most needed—when uncertainty is a significant constraint.

### ***Offense, defense, and reassurance***

Even if uncertainty is pronounced, are there conditions under which benign states can use military reassurance to reveal their preferences without accepting a greater degree of vulnerability? The inclusion of offense–defense variables would seem to provide a clear, affirmative answer. By increasing the costs of expansion, a strong defensive advantage correspondingly increases the security of states. In addition, when offense and defense are distinct, "much of the uncertainty about the other's intentions that contributes to the security dilemma is removed."<sup>27</sup> A benign state can then "deploy forces that are useful only for protecting its territory, which does not reduce its adversary's ability to defend itself," and in doing so demonstrate its motives, "since only a country that wants to take territory will buy forces that have offensive potential."<sup>28</sup> Given that a strong offensive advantage will compel security seekers to deploy offensive capabilities even if differentiation is possible, it is the combination of differentiation and defensive advantage that creates a "doubly safe" world in which aggression is difficult, motivations are transparent, and the security dilemma is effectively eliminated.<sup>29</sup>

These arguments are correct, in part, yet also incomplete. Differentiation is a necessary condition for reassurance without vulnerability; if offense and defense cannot be distinguished, gestures large enough to decrease a state's ability to attack will also decrease its ability to defend against an attack. A defensive advantage does not, however, make reassurance easier to accomplish. To reveal its motives, a benign state must take actions that



meet the same threshold—reducing its ability to defeat an adversary—whether offense or defense has the advantage. Choosing those forces that are most effective will fail to meet this threshold, even if they do not threaten others. Ultimately, actions that simply conform to structural pressures are unlikely to be perceived as a genuine reflection of a state's motives.<sup>30</sup> This limits—though does not eliminate—the influence of the offense–defense balance on reassurance, and casts doubt on the stability of a “doubly safe” world.

According to defensive realists, adopting defensive forces when defense is distinct and has the advantage should send a clear message that a state does not intend to expand, while leaving it no less capable of protecting itself. To disclose information about a benign state's motives, however, greedy states must be less likely to pursue the same policy and thus more willing to retain or develop offense under these conditions. This is less certain. Defensive realists acknowledge that security seekers will often choose offensive forces when offense has the advantage, despite their preference to the contrary. Yet greedy states seem exempt from this logic. As Jervis argues, when defense is both distinguishable and strong, “There is no reason for a status-quo power to be tempted to procure offensive forces, and aggressors give notice of their intentions by the posture they adopt.”<sup>31</sup>

If defensive forces are more efficient, however, all actors have an incentive to adopt them: “States buy the force that works, hence they buy defensive forces when the defense dominates, and they buy offensive forces when the offense dominates.”<sup>32</sup> Although a greedy state prefers offensive capabilities that will allow it to expand, it may be unable to act on this preference: offensive weapons will consume a greater portion of its resources, provide other states with the opportunity to balance by revealing its aggressive motives, and ultimately reduce its ability to defeat states that have adopted more effective defensive forces.<sup>33</sup> Given this likely disadvantage, a greedy state could defer its aggressive ambitions due to strategic exigencies, choose the same capabilities as a security seeker, and bide its time until offense regained the advantage . . . This in turn suggests that, like an offensive advantage, a defensive advantage may also lead greedy and benign states to adopt similar postures and appear indistinguishable.<sup>34</sup>

Although the security dilemma will be diminished when defense has the advantage, this condition is much less favorable for reassurance than is generally supposed. If a state's prospects for achieving success with an offensive strategy are extremely small, offensive capabilities will become less important,<sup>35</sup> and forgoing offense or shifting to defense will communicate little information about a state's motives.<sup>36</sup> Until each actor knew that others were adopting a more defensive posture by choice, rather than due to circumstance, benign states able to concentrate on defense would appear the same as greedy states unable to adopt offense. Demonstrating benign preferences will therefore require a state to accept limitations on or reductions in the very capabilities that are most effective, whether offensive or defensive.

This conclusion limits the influence of the offense–defense balance on reassurance; neither an offensive advantage nor a defensive advantage is inherently more favorable. Nevertheless, the balance does influence the extent to which a state must limit or reduce its forces if the goal is to reveal its motives. It does so by affecting whether a particular signal will in fact decrease a state's capabilities, and to what degree. As Stephen Van Evera notes, when offense has the advantage even small changes in the size of a state's military forces will generate large shifts in its relative power. When defense has the advantage, however, only much more substantial changes in a state's forces will significantly affect its ability to attack and defend.<sup>37</sup> This argument can be extended to reassurance. Specifically, an offensive advantage will make smaller gestures credible but dangerous; a defensive

advantage will have the opposite effects. These effects further indicate, however, that neither offensive nor defensive advantages are conducive to reassurance.

When offense is strong and conquest is easy, small gestures can significantly decrease a state's ability to defeat its adversary and should therefore reveal its preferences. Halting an offensive arms buildup, for example, may be sufficient for reassurance, while large reductions in offensive forces will be unnecessary.<sup>38</sup> Even small gestures will appear prohibitively dangerous, however, as a state would be left at a potential disadvantage vis-à-vis adversaries that retained the ability to develop less expensive or more efficient offensive capabilities.<sup>39</sup> Efforts at reassurance when offense is strong should therefore be particularly rare. Alternatively, a defensive advantage has the reverse and somewhat paradoxical effects of encouraging reassurance while making it more difficult to pursue successfully. When conquest is difficult, a benign state can accept small reductions in its defensive forces without endangering its security. Yet smaller gestures are unlikely to decrease the threat it poses to its adversary, which is already small. Therefore, only more substantial concessions will reveal its preferences. Consequently, larger reductions in a state's defensive forces may be necessary. Because states are more secure when defense is strong, however, they have virtually no incentive to attempt reassuring gestures that might undermine that security in the hope of overcoming uncertainty. In short, neither offensive nor defensive advantages allow states to reveal their motives without also increasing their vulnerability.

If offense and defense both act as a constraint on reassurance, the question remains as to whether structural variables also provide opportunities to overcome uncertainty. Incorporating offense–defense variables does suggest conditions that would allow states to reveal their motives without the disincentive of increased vulnerability, though these are not the conditions usually identified as having such effects. Specifically, when offense and defense are differentiated and the offense–defense balance is neutral, benign states can identify themselves with the forces they choose, and can do so without endangering their security. When these two conditions are met, states have a choice between offensive and defensive capabilities. More important, because both are equally effective, structure is indeterminate as to which should be chosen. Greedy actors can deploy offense; benign actors can deploy defense; and, if states have approximate parity in resources, each type of actor can choose its preferred forces without suffering any disadvantage. A security seeker's military posture will clearly reveal its motives, and the danger of vulnerability will be avoided. Figure 1 summarizes the effects of offense–defense variables on military reassurance . . .

## Conclusions . . .

One of the most significant problems confronted by states in an anarchic environment is the uncertainty over others' intentions and motives that can lead to counterproductive policies and suboptimal outcomes. This issue is central to the debate between offensive and defensive realism. The arguments advanced in this article suggest that the latter's solution to the problem of uncertainty—military reassurance—is incomplete because it does not fully explicate the difficulties states will confront.

For security-seeking states, military reassurance poses a number of difficult trade-offs. First, to reveal their motives, these states must alter their military posture in a way that will often leave them more vulnerable to potential aggressors. This explains why successful military reassurance is so uncommon. Second, if a state is uncertain of its rival's motives, it must attempt to determine those motives as well as demonstrate its own. Although the latter goal encourages security seekers to undertake larger gestures of reassurance to prove that

		Strong Offensive Advantage	Offense–Defense Balance Neutral	Strong Defense Advantage
Offense–Defense Differentiation	Yes	Small limits on offensive forces will be sufficient to reveal benign motives.  Small concessions will also increase a state's vulnerability.	Benign states can reveal their motives without increased vulnerability, for two reasons.  Differentiation allows these states to choose the defensive forces they prefer.  Defense is as effective as offense—benign states will not be at a disadvantage if they choose defense and others do not.	Large reductions in defensive forces will be necessary to reveal benign motives.  Large concessions will also increase a state's vulnerability.
	No	Signals that decrease a state's ability to attack will also decrease its ability to defend.  Small reductions in the number of forces will be sufficient to reveal benign motives.  Small concessions will also increase a state's vulnerability.	Signals that decrease a state's ability to attack will also decrease its ability to defend.  Moderate reductions in the number of forces will reveal benign motives.  Moderate concessions will also increase a state's vulnerability.	Signals that decrease a state's ability to attack will also decrease its ability to defend.  Large reductions in the number of forces will be necessary to reveal benign motives.  Large concessions will also increase a state's vulnerability.

Figure 1 Offense–Defense. Military Reassurance, and Vulnerability

they are benign, the former restrains them from doing so, encouraging them instead to take smaller, less convincing gestures so as to discover whether or not their rivals are aggressive. Third, even if offensive and defensive capabilities can be differentiated, an advantage for either will still require states to accept a greater degree of vulnerability if they want to reveal their preferences; an offensive advantage makes smaller gestures credible but dangerous, while a defensive advantage makes smaller gestures safe but unconvincing. Despite this series of trade-offs, reassurance can be achieved without increased vulnerability when offense and defense are distinct and the balance between them is neutral. Under these conditions, structure allows benign actors to choose defensive forces that reflect their preferences and that are equal to any offensive capabilities a greedy state might choose . . .

## Notes

- 1 The seminal work on structural realism remains Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979).
- 2 On offensive realism, see John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1994/95), pp. 9–14; and John J. Mearsheimer, *The*

- Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), chap. 2. On defensive realism and the security dilemma, see Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (January 1978), pp. 167–214; Charles L. Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1994/95), pp. 50–90; and Charles L. Glaser, "The Security Dilemma Revisited," *World Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (October 1997), pp. 171–201. The distinction between offensive and defensive branches of structural realism is first made in Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 10–13. For comparisons of the two, see Stephen G. Brooks, "Dueling Realisms," *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Summer 1997), pp. 445–477; Robert Jervis, "Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation: Understanding the Debate," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Summer 1999), pp. 42–63; and Stephen M. Walt, "The Enduring Relevance of the Realist Tradition," in Ira Katznelson and Helen Milner, eds., *Political Science: The State of the Discipline III* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002).
- 3 See, for example, James D. Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (February 1997), pp. 68–90. For an overview of rational choice approaches to signaling, see James D. Morrow, "The Strategic Setting of Choices: Signaling, Commitment, and Negotiation in International Politics," in David A. Lake and Robert Powell, eds., *Strategic Choice and International Relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 86–91.
  - 4 See Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); and Kenneth A. Oye, ed., *Cooperation under Anarchy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986).
  - 5 The acronym stands for Graduated Reciprocation in Tension reduction. See Charles E. Osgood, *An Alternative to War or Surrender* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1962).
  - 6 For an early discussion of this type of signaling, see Robert Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations*, 2d ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 38–40. On alternative methods of reassurance, see Janice Gross Stein, "Reassurance in International Conflict Management," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 106, No. 3 (Fall 1991), pp. 431–451.
  - 7 George W. Downs, David M. Rocke, and Randolph M. Siverson, "Arms Races and Cooperation," in Oye, *Cooperation under Anarchy*, p. 124; and Keir A. Lieber, *War and the Engineers: The Primacy of Politics over Technology* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 4.
  - 8 Barry Buzan and Eric Herring, *The Arms Dynamic in World Politics* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1998), p. 215.
  - 9 The concept of greedy or aggressively motivated states as distinct from benign or security-seeking states is made in Charles L. Glaser, "Political Consequences of Military Strategy: Expanding and Refining the Spiral and Deterrence Models," *World Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (July 1992), pp. 497–538. Below, I use the terms "motives" and "preferences" synonymously to refer to a state's underlying goals, as distinct from its "intentions" or the strategies it chooses to achieve those goals. See *ibid.*, pp. 499–500; Jeffrey A. Frieden, "Actors and Preferences in International Relations," in Lake and Powell, *Strategic Choice and International Relations*, pp. 42–45; and Robert Powell, "Anarchy in International Relations Theory: The Neorealist-Neoliberal Debate," *International Organization*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Spring 1994), p. 318.
  - 10 Morrow, "The Strategic Setting of Choices," p. 87.
  - 11 Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests."
  - 12 Glaser, "Realists as Optimists," p. 68.
  - 13 Andrew Kydd, "Sheep in Sheep's Clothing: Why Security Seekers Do Not Fight Each Other," *Security Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Autumn 1997).
  - 14 Another possible method of reassurance may be to avoid expanding or taking advantage of the adversary's vulnerability when an opportunity to do so arises. See Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations*, p. 20; and Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 43.
  - 15 Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 40.
  - 16 Glaser, "The Security Dilemma Revisited," p. 192.
  - 17 The following discussion assumes that power is approximately equal and constant. These restrictions are useful for determining the effects of offense–defense variables on reassurance. It can be suggested, however, that large power disparities may make reassurance more difficult. When power is unevenly distributed, the more powerful state can make small concessions that do not diminish its ability to defeat a weaker opponent; larger concessions will therefore be necessary

- to demonstrate benign motives. Small gestures may not appear credible from weak states either, because these states cannot defeat a more powerful state and therefore have no military advantage to relinquish. When two states are evenly matched, small concessions will likely have a larger impact on one's ability to defeat the other. For a somewhat different argument that more powerful states will be less willing—rather than less able—to reassure, see Andrew Kydd, "Game Theory and the Spiral Model," *World Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (April 1997), p. 395.
- 18 Glaser, "Realists as Optimists," pp. 58–60.
- 19 Kydd, "Sheep in Sheep's Clothing," p. 144.
- 20 Glaser, "Realists as Optimists," pp. 72–76; and Glaser, "The Security Dilemma Revisited," p. 181.
- 21 Glaser, "The Security Dilemma Revisited," p. 181.
- 22 In "Game Theory and the Spiral Model," Kydd formally demonstrates that reassurance can succeed when both sides are uncertain of each other's motives. He argues, however, that benign states "prefer to be ill prepared for wars that are forced upon them by greedy types if this enables them to avoid unnecessary wars with other security seekers" (p. 388). Why benign states would necessarily have these preferences is unclear; it is equally plausible that they would prefer to deter or defeat an aggressive actor that sought out war, even at the expense of an unnecessary conflict with a security seeker.
- 23 Glaser, "Realists as Optimists," pp. 67–68; see also *ibid.*, pp. 60, 70.
- 24 This is not to suggest that reassurance is unnecessary in situations of one-sided uncertainty where state *A* knows that its rival, state *B*, is nonaggressive, because *B* must still be convinced that *A* is nonaggressive to prevent any conflict between them. The question, however, is how *A* discovered that *B* was not a threat absent any reassurance on the part of *B*.
- 25 As Deborah Welch Larson notes, concessions can have more than one purpose. Larson, *Anatomy of Mistrust: U.S.-Soviet Relations during the Cold War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 26–27.
- 26 George Downs and David Rocke, "Tacit Bargaining and Arms Control," *World Politics*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (April 1987), p. 322 (emphasis in original). Similarly, Colin S. Gray argues that the paradox of arms control is that it is possible to achieve only when it is unnecessary. Gray, *House of Cards: Why Arms Control Must Fail* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 17–24.
- 27 Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," p. 201.
- 28 Glaser, "The Security Dilemma Revisited," p. 186.
- 29 Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," p. 214. For qualifications regarding when benign states might choose offensive capabilities, see *ibid.*, pp. 201–202; and Glaser, "The Security Dilemma Revisited," pp. 186 n. 57, 192.
- 30 Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, pp. 35–36; and Larson, *Anatomy of Mistrust*, p. 28.
- 31 Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," p. 214.
- 32 Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press), p. 147. I am grateful to David Kearn for calling this point and its implications to my attention.
- 33 Sean M. Lynn-Jones, "Offense–Defense Theory and Its Critics," *Security Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Summer 1995), p. 671.
- 34 Because greedy actors value expansion more than security seekers do, the former may be less willing than the latter to forgo offensive capabilities when defense has only a small or moderate advantage and structural pressures to adopt defense are weaker (i.e., when the offense–defense balance is closer to neutral). Doing so may communicate some information, allowing the receiver of a signal to update its beliefs while still remaining somewhat uncertain of the sender's motives. A partial separation of types would then occur. See Morrow, "The Strategic Setting of Choices," pp. 90–91; and James D. Morrow, *Game Theory for Political Scientists* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 225. As the advantage of defense grows and pressures to adopt it become stronger, even greedy states should become increasingly likely to devote their resources to these capabilities. Doing so would consequently be a less distinctive action and communicate little information.
- 35 This is less so if one state is powerful enough, relative to its adversaries, to build an offensive force that is able to counter the defender's advantage either quantitatively or qualitatively.
- 36 Glaser, "Realists as Optimists," p. 69.
- 37 Van Evera, *Causes of War*, pp. 104, 129–130.

- 38 The discussion in this paragraph assumes that offense and defense are differentiated. When they are not, small reductions in the number (rather than the type) of forces will diminish a state's ability to defeat its adversary, demonstrate its benign motives, and increase its vulnerability; only larger reductions will have these effects when defense is strong.
- 39 For example, when offense has the advantage, even negotiated agreements to limit offensive capabilities will be dangerous. Because the costs of exploitation are so high, fears of cheating and relative gains concerns will be especially pronounced. See Glaser, "Realists as Optimists," p. 66; and Robert Powell, "Absolute and Relative Gains in International Relations Theory," in David A. Baldwin, ed., *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 213.



## 6 Offensive structural realism

Offensive structural realism takes its place in the realist tradition in direct response to the more sanguine views of defensive structural realism. While offensive structural realists agree with their defensive realist counterparts that states seek security and not to maximize power for its own sake, they break sharply over the question of how states can best protect themselves. Defensive realism envisions a world where states balance quickly and effectively, where defense almost always has the advantage, and where states can signal their benign intentions to one another. Accordingly, defensive realism suggests that states seek only an “appropriate” amount of power, and that they work hard to preserve the status quo rather than to overturn it.

Offensive structural realism, in contrast, argues that the best way to stay safe is to acquire as much power as possible. This is not *animus dominandi* power maximization for its own sake, but rather is driven by the belief that only the most powerful state is truly secure. As such, states are always looking for opportunities to expand, and they only stop when they come to dominate their region of the world. According to offensive realism, it is possible for states to reach this position through careful and rational calculation; that is, by knowing when to move and when to sit tight. A sophisticated power maximizer exploits weaknesses in alliances, as well as asymmetries in information, in order to increase its relative power. Because of the stopping power of water, a power-maximizing state cannot strive for global dominance, but must instead settle for regional hegemony.

Unquestionably, the most important statement of offensive structural realism is John Mearsheimer’s *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. Although its impact has not been as widespread as that of Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics*, Mearsheimer’s text has nevertheless provided a sharply argued and credible alternative to both neorealism and defensive structural realism. The volume has provoked a good amount of scholarly criticism, both from within and outside of the realist tradition. The readings included in this chapter capture some of the central elements of the research program, as well as some of the critical responses that it has engendered.

The excerpt from *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* included in this chapter covers the assumptions and core logic of Mearsheimer’s theory. Mearsheimer claims that states inherently fear each other. However, it is a fear that is driven by structure, and not by individual or domestic-level pathology. Given the absence of a central authority to police the international system, structure compels states to worry about each other and to compete for power. For Mearsheimer, only the most powerful state can be confident that it will not be attacked. Thus, states constantly look for new opportunities to gain power at their rivals’ expense. Mearsheimer is careful to note, however, that states are sophisticated power maximizers. They look for openings to exploit and rationally calculate their

way to regional hegemony. States are not so foolish as to attempt expansion when success is impossible.

Mearsheimer introduces an offensive structural reading of the security dilemma. Readers will recall from previous chapters that the security dilemma figures prominently in both neorealism and defensive structural realism as a dynamic explaining mutual fear among status quo-seeking states. Mearsheimer's treatment is different, arguing that the security dilemma applies to the zero sum nature of power politics in general. Power is inherently threatening, hence the means to become safe necessarily make others unsafe, and the tragedy of great power politics is that states are forced to engage in security competition even though all they desire is their own survival.

Glenn Snyder offers a critical review of *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. After summarizing the differences between Waltz and Mearsheimer, Snyder then turns to a critique of Mearsheimer's discussion of the security dilemma. In particular, he notes that the security dilemma has traditionally been used to explain the presence of conflict among status quo seekers. Snyder is puzzled, because for Mearsheimer there is nothing to explain (states are revisionists because power is the key to survival) and there is no dilemma (sophisticated power maximization is a winning strategy). Snyder also argues that Mearsheimer's theory suffers from a "revisionist state bias," and that his explanation of alliance behavior throughout history is unconvincing.

Finally, Christopher Layne provides a discussion of Mearsheimer's arguments in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* as they apply to U.S. grand strategy. Layne challenges Mearsheimer's assertion that global hegemony is not possible because of the difficulty of projecting power across the world's oceans. Portraying Mearsheimer's theory as "diet" offensive realism, Layne insists that the present-day United States is a global hegemon, not merely a regional one. Layne argues that the U.S. has overcome the stopping power of water by establishing force projection capabilities throughout Europe and Asia. While Mearsheimer's theory explains U.S. policy in these areas as an attempt to prevent the rise of a regional hegemon, Layne's more "robust" interpretation of offensive realism suggests that U.S. foreign policy has resulted in global dominance.

Although offensive structural realism argues that regional hegemony is possible, it nevertheless includes some elements of balance of power theory. States which try to achieve hegemony must do so in the face of balancing by its competitors. Sometimes that balancing succeeds, and the hegemonic bid fails. Indeed, the most trenchant criticisms of offensive structural realism are empirical not logical: regional hegemony seems to be a very rare phenomenon. In modern times, the only regional hegemon has been the United States. Rise and fall realism can be contrasted with offensive structural realism on several grounds, most notably that it sees the international system as having a succession of leaders, and suggests that much of the conflict we see arises from the friction that occurs as the system leader falls from that position.

# Anarchy and the struggle for power

*John J. Mearsheimer*

From: *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), Chapter 2.

Great powers, I argue, are always searching for opportunities to gain power over their rivals, with hegemony as their final goal. This perspective does not allow for status quo powers, except for the unusual state that achieves preponderance. Instead, the system is populated with great powers that have revisionist intentions at their core.<sup>1</sup> This chapter presents a theory that explains this competition for power. Specifically, I attempt to show that there is a compelling logic behind my claim that great powers seek to maximize their share of world power . . .

## **Why states pursue power**

My explanation for why great powers vie with each other for power and strive for hegemony is derived from five assumptions about the international system. None of these assumptions alone mandates that states behave competitively. Taken together, however, they depict a world in which states have considerable reason to think and sometimes behave aggressively. In particular, the system encourages states to look for opportunities to maximize their power vis-à-vis other states . . .

## ***Bedrock assumptions***

The first assumption is that the international system is anarchic, which does not mean that it is chaotic or riven by disorder. It is easy to draw that conclusion, since realism depicts a world characterized by security competition and war. By itself, however, the realist notion of anarchy has nothing to do with conflict; it is an ordering principle, which says that the system comprises independent states that have no central authority above them.<sup>2</sup> Sovereignty, in other words, inheres in states because there is no higher ruling body in the international system.<sup>3</sup> There is no “government over governments.”<sup>4</sup>

The second assumption is that great powers inherently possess some offensive military capability, which gives them the wherewithal to hurt and possibly destroy each other. States are potentially dangerous to each other, although some states have more military might than others and are therefore more dangerous. A state’s military power is usually identified with the particular weaponry at its disposal, although even if there were no weapons, the individuals in those states could still use their feet and hands to attack the population of another state. After all, for every neck, there are two hands to choke it.

The third assumption is that states can never be certain about other states’ intentions. Specifically, no state can be sure that another state will not use its offensive military capability to attack the first state. This is not to say that states necessarily have hostile intentions.

Indeed, all of the states in the system may be reliably benign, but it is impossible to be sure of that judgment because intentions are impossible to divine with 100 percent certainty.<sup>5</sup> There are many possible causes of aggression, and no state can be sure that another state is not motivated by one of them.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, intentions can change quickly, so a state's intentions can be benign one day and hostile the next. Uncertainty about intentions is unavoidable, which means that states can never be sure that other states do not have offensive intentions to go along with their offensive capabilities.

The fourth assumption is that survival is the primary goal of great powers. Specifically, states seek to maintain their territorial integrity and the autonomy of their domestic political order. Survival dominates other motives because, once a state is conquered, it is unlikely to be in a position to pursue other aims. Soviet leader Josef Stalin put the point well during a war scare in 1927: "We can and must build socialism in the [Soviet Union]. But in order to do so we first of all have to exist."<sup>7</sup> States can and do pursue other goals, of course, but security is their most important objective.

The fifth assumption is that great powers are rational actors. They are aware of their external environment and they think strategically about how to survive in it. In particular, they consider the preferences of other states and how their own behavior is likely to affect the behavior of those other states, and how the behavior of those other states is likely to affect their own strategy for survival. Moreover, states pay attention to the long term as well as the immediate consequences of their actions.

As emphasized, none of these assumptions alone dictates that great powers as a general rule *should* behave aggressively toward each other. There is surely the possibility that some state might have hostile intentions, but the only assumption dealing with a specific motive that is common to all states says that their principal objective is to survive, which by itself is a rather harmless goal. Nevertheless, when the five assumptions are married together, they create powerful incentives for great powers to think and act offensively with regard to each other. In particular, three general patterns of behavior result: fear, self-help, and power maximization.

### ***State behavior***

Great powers fear each other. They regard each other with suspicion, and they worry that war might be in the offing. They anticipate danger. There is little room for trust among states. For sure, the level of fear varies across time and space, but it cannot be reduced to a trivial level. From the perspective of any one great power, all other great powers are potential enemies. This point is illustrated by the reaction of the United Kingdom and France to German reunification at the end of the Cold War. Despite the fact that these three states had been close allies for almost forty-five years, both the United Kingdom and France immediately began worrying about the potential dangers of a united Germany.<sup>8</sup>

The basis of this fear is that in a world where great powers have the capability to attack each other and might have the motive to do so, any state bent on survival must be at least suspicious of other states and reluctant to trust them. Add to this the "911" problem—the absence of a central authority to which a threatened state can turn for help—and states have even greater incentive to fear each other. Moreover, there is no mechanism, other than the possible self-interest of third parties, for punishing an aggressor. Because it is sometimes difficult to deter potential aggressors, states have ample reason not to trust other states and to be prepared for war with them.

The possible consequences of falling victim to aggression further amplify the importance of fear as a motivating force in world politics. Great powers do not compete with each other as if international politics were merely an economic marketplace. Political competition among states is a much more dangerous business than mere economic intercourse; the former can lead to war, and war often means mass killing on the battlefield as well as mass murder of civilians. In extreme cases, war can even lead to the destruction of states. The horrible consequences of war sometimes cause states to view each other not just as competitors, but as potentially deadly enemies. Political antagonism, in short, tends to be intense, because the stakes are great.

States in the international system also aim to guarantee their own survival. Because other states are potential threats, and because there is no higher authority to come to their rescue when they dial 911, states cannot depend on others for their own security. Each state tends to see itself as vulnerable and alone, and therefore it aims to provide for its own survival. In international politics, God helps those who help themselves. This emphasis on self-help does not preclude states from forming alliances.<sup>9</sup> But alliances are only temporary marriages of convenience: today's alliance partner might be tomorrow's enemy, and today's enemy might be tomorrow's alliance partner. For example, the United States fought with China and the Soviet Union against Germany and Japan in World War II, but soon thereafter flip-flopped enemies and partners and allied with West Germany and Japan against China and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

States operating in a self-help world almost always act according to their own self-interest and do not subordinate their interests to the interests of other states, or to the interests of the so-called international community. The reason is simple: it pays to be selfish in a self-help world. This is true in the short term as well as in the long term, because if a state loses in the short run, it might not be around for the long haul.

Apprehensive about the ultimate intentions of other states, and aware that they operate in a self-help system, states quickly understand that the best way to ensure their survival is to be the most powerful state in the system. The stronger a state is relative to its potential rivals, the less likely it is that any of those rivals will attack it and threaten its survival. Weaker states will be reluctant to pick fights with more powerful states because the weaker states are likely to suffer military defeat. Indeed, the bigger the gap in power between any two states, the less likely it is that the weaker will attack the stronger. Neither Canada nor Mexico, for example, would countenance attacking the United States, which is far more powerful than its neighbors. The ideal situation is to be the hegemon in the system. As Immanuel Kant said, "It is the desire of every state, or of its ruler, to arrive at a condition of perpetual peace by conquering the whole world, if that were possible."<sup>10</sup> Survival would then be almost guaranteed.<sup>11</sup>

Consequently, states pay close attention to how power is distributed among them, and they make a special effort to maximize their share of world power. Specifically, they look for opportunities to alter the balance of power by acquiring additional increments of power at the expense of potential rivals. States employ a variety of means—economic, diplomatic, and military—to shift the balance of power in their favor, even if doing so makes other states suspicious or even hostile. Because one state's gain in power is another state's loss, great powers tend to have a zero-sum mentality when dealing with each other. The trick, of course, is to be the winner in this competition and to dominate the other states in the system. Thus, the claim that states maximize relative power is tantamount to arguing that states are disposed to think offensively toward other states, even though their ultimate motive is simply to survive. In short, great powers have aggressive intentions.<sup>12</sup>

Even when a great power achieves a distinct military advantage over its rivals, it continues looking for chances to gain more power. The pursuit of power stops only when hegemony is achieved. The idea that a great power might feel secure without dominating the system, provided it has an “appropriate amount” of power, is not persuasive, for two reasons.<sup>13</sup> First, it is difficult to assess how much relative power one state must have over its rivals before it is secure. Is twice as much power an appropriate threshold? Or is three times as much power the magic number? The root of the problem is that power calculations alone do not determine which side wins a war. Clever strategies, for example, sometimes allow less powerful states to defeat more powerful foes.

Second, determining how much power is enough becomes even more complicated when great powers contemplate how power will be distributed among them ten or twenty years down the road. The capabilities of individual states vary over time, sometimes markedly, and it is often difficult to predict the direction and scope of change in the balance of power. Remember, few in the West anticipated the collapse of the Soviet Union before it happened. In fact, during the first half of the Cold War, many in the West feared that the Soviet economy would eventually generate greater wealth than the American economy, which would cause a marked power shift against the United States and its allies. What the future holds for China and Russia and what the balance of power will look like in 2020 is difficult to foresee.

Given the difficulty of determining how much power is enough for today and tomorrow, great powers recognize that the best way to ensure their security is to achieve hegemony now, thus eliminating any possibility of a challenge by another great power. Only a misguided state would pass up an opportunity to be the hegemon in the system because it thought it already had sufficient power to survive.<sup>14</sup> But even if a great power does not have the wherewithal to achieve hegemony (and that is usually the case), it will still act offensively to amass as much power as it can, because states are almost always better off with more rather than less power. In short, states do not become status quo powers until they completely dominate the system.

All states are influenced by this logic, which means that not only do they look for opportunities to take advantage of one another, they also work to ensure that other states do not take advantage of them. After all, rival states are driven by the same logic, and most states are likely to recognize their own motives at play in the actions of other states. In short, states ultimately pay attention to defense as well as offense. They think about conquest themselves, and they work to check aggressor states from gaining power at their expense. This inexorably leads to a world of constant security competition, where states are willing to lie, cheat, and use brute force if it helps them gain advantage over their rivals. Peace, if one defines that concept as a state of tranquility or mutual concord, is not likely to break out in this world.

The “security dilemma,” which is one of the most well-known concepts in the international relations literature, reflects the basic logic of offensive realism. The essence of the dilemma is that the measures a state takes to increase its own security usually decrease the security of other states. Thus, it is difficult for a state to increase its own chances of survival without threatening the survival of other states. John Herz first introduced the security dilemma in a 1950 article in the journal *World Politics*.<sup>15</sup> After discussing the anarchic nature of international politics, he writes, “Striving to attain security from . . . attack, [states] are driven to acquire more and more power in order to escape the impact of the power of others. This, in turn, renders the others more insecure and compels them to prepare for the worst. Since none can ever feel entirely secure in such a world of competing units, power



competition ensues, and the vicious circle of security and power accumulation is on.”<sup>16</sup> The implication of Herz’s analysis is clear: the best way for a state to survive in anarchy is to take advantage of other states and gain power at their expense. The best defense is a good offense. Since this message is widely understood, ceaseless security competition ensues. Unfortunately, little can be done to ameliorate the security dilemma as long as states operate in anarchy.

It should be apparent from this discussion that saying that states are power maximizers is tantamount to saying that they care about relative power, not absolute power. There is an important distinction here, because states concerned about relative power behave differently than do states interested in absolute power.<sup>17</sup> States that maximize relative power are concerned primarily with the distribution of material capabilities. In particular, they try to gain as large a power advantage as possible over potential rivals, because power is the best means to survival in a dangerous world. Thus, states motivated by relative power concerns are likely to forgo large gains in their own power, if such gains give rival states even greater power, for smaller national gains that nevertheless provide them with a power advantage over their rivals.<sup>18</sup> States that maximize absolute power, on the other hand, care only about the size of their own gains, not those of other states. They are not motivated by balance-of-power logic but instead are concerned with amassing power without regard to how much power other states control. They would jump at the opportunity for large gains, even if a rival gained more in the deal. Power, according to this logic, is not a means to an end (survival), but an end in itself.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Calculated aggression***

There is obviously little room for status quo powers in a world where states are inclined to look for opportunities to gain more power. Nevertheless, great powers cannot always act on their offensive intentions, because behavior is influenced not only by what states want, but also by their capacity to realize these desires. Every state might want to be king of the hill, but not every state has the wherewithal to compete for that lofty position, much less achieve it. Much depends on how military might is distributed among the great powers. A great power that has a marked power advantage over its rivals is likely to behave more aggressively, because it has the capability as well as the incentive to do so.

By contrast, great powers facing powerful opponents will be less inclined to consider offensive action and more concerned with defending the existing balance of power from threats by their more powerful opponents. Let there be an opportunity for those weaker states to revise the balance in their own favor, however, and they will take advantage of it. Stalin put the point well at the end of World War II: “Everyone imposes his own system as far as his army can reach. It cannot be otherwise.”<sup>20</sup> States might also have the capability to gain advantage over a rival power but nevertheless decide that the perceived costs of offense are too high and do not justify the expected benefits.

In short, great powers are not mindless aggressors so bent on gaining power that they charge headlong into losing wars or pursue Pyrrhic victories. On the contrary, before great powers take offensive actions, they think carefully about the balance of power and about how other states will react to their moves. They weigh the costs and risks of offense against the likely benefits. If the benefits do not outweigh the risks, they sit tight and wait for a more propitious moment. Nor do states start arms races that are unlikely to improve their overall position . . . [S]tates sometimes limit defense spending either because spending more would bring no strategic advantage or because spending more would weaken the economy and

undermine the state's power in the long run.<sup>21</sup> To paraphrase Clint Eastwood, a state has to know its limitations to survive in the international system . . .

### **Hegemony's limits**

Great powers, as I have emphasized, strive to gain power over their rivals and hopefully become hegemons. Once a state achieves that exalted position, it becomes a status quo power. More needs to be said, however, about the meaning of hegemony.

A hegemon is a state that is so powerful that it dominates all the other states in the system.<sup>22</sup> No other state has the military wherewithal to put up a serious fight against it. In essence, a hegemon is the only great power in the system. A state that is substantially more powerful than the other great powers in the system is not a hegemon, because it faces, by definition, other great powers. The United Kingdom in the mid-nineteenth century, for example, is sometimes called a hegemon. But it was not a hegemon, because there were four other great powers in Europe at the time—Austria, France, Prussia, and Russia—and the United Kingdom did not dominate them in any meaningful way. In fact, during that period, the United Kingdom considered France to be a serious threat to the balance of power. Europe in the nineteenth century was multipolar, not unipolar.

Hegemony means domination of the system, which is usually interpreted to mean the entire world. It is possible, however, to apply the concept of a system more narrowly and use it to describe particular regions, such as Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Western Hemisphere. Thus, one can distinguish between *global hegemons*, which dominate the world, and *regional hegemons*, which dominate distinct geographical areas. The United States has been a regional hegemon in the Western Hemisphere for at least the past one hundred years. No other state in the Americas has sufficient military might to challenge it, which is why the United States is widely recognized as the only great power in its region.

My argument . . . is that except for the unlikely event wherein one state achieves clear-cut nuclear superiority, it is virtually impossible for any state to achieve global hegemony. The principal impediment to world domination is the difficulty of projecting power across the world's oceans onto the territory of a rival great power. The United States, for example, is the most powerful state on the planet today. But it does not dominate Europe and Northeast Asia the way it does the Western Hemisphere, and it has no intention of trying to conquer and control those distant regions, mainly because of the stopping power of water. Indeed, there is reason to think that the American military commitment to Europe and Northeast Asia might wither away over the next decade. In short, there has never been a global hegemon, and there is not likely to be one anytime soon.

The best outcome a great power can hope for is to be a regional hegemon and possibly control another region that is nearby and accessible over land. The United States is the only regional hegemon in modern history, although other states have fought major wars in pursuit of regional hegemony: imperial Japan in Northeast Asia, and Napoleonic France, Wilhelmine Germany, and Nazi Germany in Europe. But none succeeded. The Soviet Union, which is located in Europe and Northeast Asia, threatened to dominate both of those regions during the Cold War. The Soviet Union might also have attempted to conquer the oil-rich Persian Gulf region, with which it shared a border. But even if Moscow had been able to dominate Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf, which it never came close to doing, it still would have been unable to conquer the Western Hemisphere and become a true global hegemon.

States that achieve regional hegemony seek to prevent great powers in other regions from

duplicating their feat. Regional hegemons, in other words, do not want peers. Thus the United States, for example, played a key role in preventing imperial Japan, Wilhelmine Germany, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union from gaining regional supremacy. Regional hegemons attempt to check aspiring hegemons in other regions because they fear that a rival great power that dominates its own region will be an especially powerful foe that is essentially free to cause trouble in the fearful great power's backyard. Regional hegemons prefer that there be at least two great powers located together in other regions, because their proximity will force them to concentrate their attention on each other rather than on the distant hegemon.

Furthermore, if a potential hegemon emerges among them, the other great powers in that region might be able to contain it by themselves, allowing the distant hegemon to remain safely on the sidelines. Of course, if the local great powers were unable to do the job, the distant hegemon would take the appropriate measures to deal with the threatening state. The United States, as noted, has assumed that burden on four separate occasions in the twentieth century, which is why it is commonly referred to as an "offshore balancer."

In sum, the ideal situation for any great power is to be the only regional hegemon in the world. That state would be a status quo power, and it would go to considerable lengths to preserve the existing distribution of power. The United States is in that enviable position today; it dominates the Western Hemisphere and there is no hegemon in any other area of the world. But if a regional hegemon is confronted with a peer competitor, it would no longer be a status quo power. Indeed, it would go to considerable lengths to weaken and maybe even destroy its distant rival. Of course, both regional hegemons would be motivated by that logic, which would make for a fierce security competition between them . . .

## Notes

- 1 Most realist scholars allow in their theories for status quo powers that are not hegemons. At least some states, they argue, are likely to be satisfied with the balance of power and thus have no incentive to change it. See Randall L. Schweller, "Neorealism's Status-Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?" *Security Studies* 5, No. 3 (Spring 1996, special issue on "Realism: Restatements and Renewal," ed. Benjamin Frankel), pp. 98–101; and Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), pp. 84–86, 91–92, 125–26.
- 2 The concept of anarchy and its consequences for international politics was first articulated by G. Lowes Dickinson, *The European Anarchy* (New York: Macmillan, 1916). For a more recent and more elaborate discussion of anarchy, see [Kenneth N.] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* [(Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979)], pp. 88–93. Also see Robert J. Art and Robert Jervis, eds., *International Politics: Anarchy, Force, Imperialism* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), pt. 1; and Helen Milner, "The Assumption of Anarchy in International Relations Theory: A Critique," *Review of International Studies* 17, No. 1 (January 1991), pp. 67–85.
- 3 Although the focus in this study is on the state system, realist logic can be applied to other kinds of anarchic systems. After all, it is the absence of central authority, not any special characteristic of states, that causes them to compete for power. Markus Fischer, for example, applies the theory to Europe in the Middle Ages, before the state system emerged in 1648. See Fisher, "Feudal Europe, 800–1300: Communal Discourse and Conflictual Practices," *International Organization* 46, No. 2 (Spring 1992), pp. 427–66. The theory can also be used to explain the behavior of individuals. The most important work in this regard is Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C.B. Macpherson (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1986). Also see Elijah Anderson, "The Code of the Streets," *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1994, pp. 80–94; Barry R. Posen, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict," *Survival* 35, No. 1 (Spring 1993), pp. 27–47; and Robert J. Spitzer, *The Politics of Gun Control* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1995), chap. 6.
- 4 Inis L. Claude, Jr., *Swords into Plowshares: The Problem and Progress of International Organization*, 4th ed. (New York: Random House, 1971), p.14.

- 5 The claim that states might have benign intentions is simply a starting assumption. I argue subsequently that when you combine the theory's five assumptions, states are put in a position in which they are strongly disposed to having hostile intentions toward each other.
- 6 My theory ultimately argues that great powers behave offensively towards each other because that is the best way for them to guarantee their security in an anarchic world. The assumption here, however, is that there are many reasons besides security for why a state might behave aggressively toward another state. In fact, it is uncertainty about whether those non-security causes of war are at play, or might come into play, that pushes great powers to worry about their survival and thus act offensively. Security concerns alone cannot cause great powers to act aggressively. The possibility that at least one state might be motivated by non-security calculations is a necessary condition for offensive realism, as well as for any other structural theory of international politics that predicts security competition. Schweller puts the point well: "If states are assumed to seek nothing more than their own survival, why would they feel threatened? Why would they engage in balancing behavior? In a hypothetical world that has never experienced crime, the concept of security is meaningless." Schweller, "Neorealism's Status-Quo Bias," p. 91. Herbert Butterfield makes essentially the same point when he writes, "Wars would hardly be likely to occur if all men were Christian saints, competing with one another in nothing, perhaps, save self-renunciation." C.T. McIntire, ed., *Herbert Butterfield: Writings on Christianity and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 73. Also see Jack Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), chap. 2.
- 7 Quoted in Jon Jacobson, *When the Soviet Union Entered World Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 271.
- 8 See Elizabeth Pond, *Beyond the Wall: Germany's Road to Unification* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1993), chap. 12; Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), chaps. 25–26; and Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), chap. 4.
- 9 Frederick Schuman introduced the concept of self-help in *International Politics: An Introduction to the Western State System* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1933), pp. 199–202, 514, although Waltz made the concept famous in *Theory of International Politics*, chap. 6. On realism and alliances, see Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).
- 10 Quoted in Martin Wight, *Power Politics* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1946), p. 40.
- 11 If one state achieves hegemony, the system ceases to be anarchic and becomes hierarchic. Offensive realism, which assumes international anarchy, has little to say about politics under hierarchy. But as discussed later, it is highly unlikely that any state will become a global hegemon, although regional hegemony is feasible. Thus, realism is likely to provide important insights about world politics for the foreseeable future, save for what goes on inside in a region that is dominated by a hegemon.
- 12 Although great powers always have aggressive intentions, they are not always *aggressors*, mainly because sometimes they do not have the capability to behave aggressively. I use the term "aggressor" throughout this book to denote great powers that have the material wherewithal to act on their aggressive intentions.
- 13 Kenneth Waltz maintains that great powers should not pursue hegemony but instead should aim to control an "appropriate" amount of world power. See Waltz, "The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory," in Robert I. Rotberg and Theodore K. Rabb, eds., *The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.40.
- 14 The following hypothetical example illustrates this point. Assume that American policymakers were forced to choose between two different power balances in the Western Hemisphere. The first is the present distribution of power, whereby the United States is a hegemon that no state in the region would dare challenge militarily. In the second scenario, China replaces Canada and Germany takes the place of Mexico. Even though the United States would have a significant military advantage over both China and Germany, it is difficult to imagine any American strategist opting for this scenario over U.S. hegemony in the Western Hemisphere.
- 15 John H. Herz, "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 2, No. 2 (January 1950), pp. 157–80. Although Dickinson did not use the term "security dilemma," its logic clearly articulated in *European Anarchy*, pp. 20, 88.

- 16 Herz, "Idealist Internationalism," p. 157.
- 17 See Joseph M. Grieco, "Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism," *International Organization* 42, No. 3 (Summer 1988), pp. 485–507; Stephen D. Krasner, "Global Communications and National Power: Life on the Pareto Frontier," *World Politics* 43, No. 3 (April 1991), pp. 336–66; and Robert Powell, "Absolute and Relative Gains in International Relations Theory," *American Political Science Review* 85, No. 4 (December 1991), pp. 1303–20.
- 18 See Michael Mastanduno, "Do Relative Gains Matter? America's Response to Japanese Industrial Policy," *International Security* 16, No.1 (Summer 1991), pp. 73–113.
- 19 Waltz maintains that in Hans Morgenthau's theory, states seek power as an end in itself; thus, they are concerned with absolute power, not relative power. See Waltz, "Origins of War," pp. 40–41; and Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 126–27. Although Morgenthau occasionally makes statements that appear to support Waltz's charge, there is abundant evidence in Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th ed. (New York: Knopf, 1973) that states are concerned mainly with the pursuit of relative power.
- 20 Quoted in Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 36.
- 21 In short, the key issue for evaluating offensive realism is not whether a state is constantly trying to conquer other countries or going all out in terms of defense spending, but whether or not great powers routinely pass up promising opportunities to gain power over rivals.
- 22 See Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 29; and William C. Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions during the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 12–14.

# Mearsheimer's world

## Offensive realism and the struggle for security

Glenn H. Snyder

From: *International Security* 27, no. 1 (Summer 2002), pp. 149–73.

More than fifty years have passed since Hans Morgenthau introduced “realism” as an approach to the study of international relations. Since then, the approach has withstood not only a steady assault from such external quarters as liberal institutionalism, the democratic peace school, and “constructivism” but also a marked divisive tendency. Splinter groups have emerged, each waving an identifying adjective to herald some new variant or emphasis. The first of these came in the late 1970s, when Kenneth Waltz’s “neorealism” marked a major split from Morgenthau’s traditional realism, which henceforth became known as “classical” realism.<sup>1</sup> Since then, especially during the last decade, new variants and new tags have proliferated. The field of international relations now has at least two varieties of “structural realism,”<sup>2</sup> probably three kinds of “offensive realism,”<sup>3</sup> and several types of “defensive realism,”<sup>4</sup> in addition to “neoclassical,” “contingent,” “specific,” and “generalist” realism.<sup>5</sup> The debate among partisans of these differing views has been vigorous. It has also been helpful in clarifying—if not resolving—some of the issues involved. A prominent participant in these debates has been John Mearsheimer, under the banner of offensive realism. He now offers readers a book-length statement of his views, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.<sup>6</sup>

This volume has been eagerly awaited by many international relations scholars and comes with strong recommendations from those who have read it. For example, Samuel Huntington declares on the dust jacket that it “ranks with, and in many respects supersedes, the works of Morgenthau and Waltz in the core canon of the realist literature on international politics.” I attempt in this essay to assess to what extent, and in what respects, this encomium may be justified. I compare offensive realism mainly to Waltz’s theory, because Mearsheimer himself casts Waltz as the leading defensive realist and his primary target. I conclude that the book is a major theoretical advance. It does not supersede Waltz, but nicely complements him by introducing a theoretical rationale for revisionist states. This provides a foundation for merging offensive and defensive realism into a single theory. Mearsheimer also offers striking new insights into balance-of-power theory, the role of geography, and the debate over land power versus air and naval power. The theory is tested and illustrated over two centuries of history and projected two decades into the twenty-first century. These projections are provocative and pessimistic—but still plausible. The book’s principal weakness is its overemphasis on power and security maximization as motivations of states’ behavior . . .



### The core theory: Mearsheimer versus Waltz

Mearsheimer begins with the assertion that great powers “maximize their relative power” (p. 21). That puts him close to Morgenthau, who famously proclaimed a never-ending struggle for power among states, arising from an *animus dominandi*—that is, a natural human urge to dominate others.<sup>7</sup> Mearsheimer, however, rejects this source of causation. There is a limitless power struggle, he avers, but what drives it is not an appetite for power in the human animal, but a search for security that is forced by the anarchic structure of the international system. When all states have capabilities for doing each other harm, each is driven to amass as much power as it can to be as secure as possible against attack. This assumption of a security motivation and structural causation, of course, places Mearsheimer closer to Waltz. Where Mearsheimer departs from Waltz is in his assertion that the search for power and security is insatiable, whereas Waltz says that it has limits. Thus he disagrees with Waltz on the question of “how much power states want.” Mearsheimer makes the point succinctly: “For defensive realists, the international structure provides states with little incentive to seek additional increments of power; instead it pushes them to maintain the existing balance of power. Preserving power, rather than increasing it, is the main goal of states. Offensive realists, on the other hand, believe that status quo powers are rarely found in world politics, because the international system creates powerful incentives for states to look for opportunities to gain power at the expense of rivals, and to take advantage of those situations when the benefits outweigh the costs. A state’s ultimate goal is to be the hegemon in the system” (p. 21).

Waltz confirms the disagreement: “In anarchy, security is the highest end. Only if survival is assured can states safely seek such other goals as tranquility, profit and power. The first concern of states is not to maximize power but to maintain their positions in the system.”<sup>8</sup> Clearly, Waltz believes that “survival” (i.e., sufficient security) can be assured with power well short of the “hegemonic” amount postulated by Mearsheimer . . .

Mearsheimer’s offensive realism seems to predict much more conflict and war than does Waltz’s defensive realism. States are never satisfied; they keep reaching for more power, and these power urges seem bound to collide. Mearsheimer’s states seem perilously close to Arnold Wolfers’s “hysterical Caesars”—states that, “haunted by fear,” pursue “the will-of-the-wisp of absolute security.”<sup>9</sup> Waltz’s states are less fearful, more accepting of risks, more oriented toward particular nonsecurity interests, and more willing to live with only a modest amount of security. Sensible statesmen seek only an “appropriate” amount of power, given their security needs, says Waltz.<sup>10</sup>

If his fundamental difference with Waltz is about the amount of security that states desire or require, as Mearsheimer suggests, we can put a finer point on it. Security might be defined crudely as the probability that one’s core interests will not be challenged or violated over some reasonable time span. The amount of security actually “purchased” by an increment of power would then translate into an increase in that probability. But increments would be purchased only so long as their marginal security value exceeded their opportunity costs. Waltz (or another defensive realist) might argue that at some point well short of hegemony, power/security accumulation runs into diminishing marginal returns, until costs begin to exceed benefits and security purchases fade to nothing. Mearsheimer denies that increments of security diminish in value at the margin; in fact, he asserts the opposite: A state with a marked power advantage over its rivals will behave more aggressively than one facing powerful opponents “because it has the capability as well as the incentive to do so” (p. 37). This seems to say that as a state accumulates power, its marginal costs of

further accumulation decline and/or marginal benefits increase, so that future increments are subject to increasing returns. Waltz, on the other hand, declares that "states balance power rather than maximize it. States can seldom afford to make maximum power their goal. International politics is too serious a business for that."<sup>11</sup> In other words, after a state has balanced against a dangerous opponent and thereby achieved a satisfactory degree of security, there is no further need for power accumulation . . .

### *The security dilemma*

A central concept in nearly all realist theory is that of the "security dilemma." Mearsheimer quotes with approval John Herz's original statement of the dilemma: "Striving to attain security from . . . attack, [states] are driven to acquire more and more power in order to escape the impact of the power of others. This, in turn, renders the others more insecure and compels them to prepare for the worst. Since none can ever feel entirely secure in such a world of competing units, power competition ensues and the vicious circle of security and power accumulation is on" (p. 36).<sup>12</sup>

This, says Mearsheimer, is "a synoptic statement of offensive realism." However, this is correct only in a limited sense: The great powers in offensive realism indeed are interested primarily in security, and their security moves do threaten others, causing them to take countermeasures, as in the security dilemma. But here the similarity begins to fade. The security dilemma, in most formulations (including Herz's), emphasizes how power and security competition can occur between states that want nothing more than to preserve the status quo.<sup>13</sup> Although no one is actually aggressive, uncertainty about others' intentions forces each to take protective measures that appear threatening to others. But there are no status quo powers in Mearsheimer's world. All great powers are revisionist and "primed for offense" (p. 3). Mearsheimer does allow that states do not know each other's intentions for sure, but he also says that they "are likely to recognize their own motives at play in the actions of other states" (p. 35). If all are revisionist and believe (correctly) that others are too, it is hard to see any "dilemma." Each great power's security measures present real threats to others, not merely hypothetical ones. Hence there is no question of "unnecessary" competition being generated by the need to ensure against uncertain threats.

Moreover, security moves in the offensive realist scenario are moves of territorial expansion, which involve actually taking something from others, rather than merely preparing to do so, as with arms procurement or alliance formation. Because territorial expansion is itself predatory, it strongly implies future predatory intentions. Thus, even though the expanding state's ultimate objective is "security," its actual behavior on the way to achieving this objective may be virtually indistinguishable from pure aggrandizement. In this world, security needs are bound to be incompatible; not everyone can increase their "share of world power" at the same time. There is a lot of security competition but little security "dilemma."

Mearsheimer draws from Herz's analysis the "implication" that "the best way for a state to survive in anarchy is to take advantage of other states and gain power at their expense. The best defense is a good offense" (p. 36).<sup>14</sup> He takes issue with "some defensive realists" who emphasize that offensive strategies are self-defeating, because they trigger balancing countermeasures. "Given this understanding of the security dilemma," he declares, "hardly any security competition should ensue among rational states, because it would be fruitless, maybe even counter-productive, to try to gain advantage over rival powers. Indeed, it is difficult to see why states operating in a world where aggressive behavior equals self-defeating behavior would face a 'security dilemma.' It would seem to make good sense for

all states to forsake war and live in peace" (p. 417, n. 27). Mearsheimer could have pointed to the possible bad consequences of "living in peace" as a reason why security measures, even "self-defeating" ones, may be necessary. For example, inaction in the form of a failure to take deterrent measures may be exploited by a rival, at a possible cost far greater than the costs of action. The option of inaction is often omitted in discussions of the security dilemma, even though it is the "other horn" of the dilemma and usually essential to a full explanation of outcomes.

But Mearsheimer does not make this argument. Instead he contends that offensive military action is not, or need not be, "self-defeating." This is simply because conquest is often successful and profitable. In this way, he defends his theory against the charge that its actors are irrational in failing to anticipate the balancing process. That many of them (e.g., Nazi Germany) were eventually defeated does not show that they were irrational, he claims, but only that they took a rational "calculated risk" that happened to be unsuccessful. They could easily have been successful; indeed they came close. Balancing coalitions eventually formed, but these are "difficult to put together" (p. 212).

One reason why the security dilemma does not fit neatly into Mearsheimer's theory—or why it has to be bent out of shape to fit—is the linking of an inherently defensive goal—security and survival—with offensive behavior. In particular, it seems perverse to insist on discussing territorial expansion as a means to achieving security, rather than to something beyond security (e.g., national glory, honor, or perhaps economic enrichment). A corollary of this is the scant attention that Mearsheimer pays to various nonsecurity goals, such as advancing an ideology or seeking national unification. Mearsheimer's chief message about nonsecurity goals is that great powers pursue them only when they are not in conflict with power and security imperatives (p. 46). Many concrete "national interests" will, of course, involve some combination of security and nonsecurity values, just as strategies may require some mixture of offensive and defensive elements. In many cases, nonsecurity interests may be the more compelling. France, for example, was interested in the return of Alsace-Lorraine after 1871 largely for reasons other than the province's strategic or security value. Of course, bringing nonsecurity values into Mearsheimer's theory might weaken the theory by placing limits on power needs and diluting security motivations. But parsimony and logical elegance may need to be sacrificed in favor of greater "realism."

### *Status quo versus revisionist states*

Waltz's theory, says Mearsheimer, suffers from a "status quo bias" (p. 20): It is entirely a theory about how defensively motivated states behave. Waltz probably would answer that his theory does admit the presence of revisionist states, even though their motivation, being generated at the "unit level," is outside the purview of his theory. Moreover, he need not distinguish between revisionist and status quo powers to make his theory work; competition for power and security ensues even when all states seek only security.<sup>15</sup> Although Waltz admits the possibility of revisionist states, he has virtually nothing to say about what drives them; all he has to offer is words of caution: The "excessive accumulation of power" will be self-defeating, because it will merely trigger balancing behavior.<sup>16</sup>

Mearsheimer sets out to correct Waltz's alleged status quo bias. But in doing so, he seems to overcorrect, although this impression may be largely due to his confrontational style. If Waltz's theoretical world is populated entirely by status quo states, Mearsheimer's contains only revisionist ones. All states, or at least all great powers, seek to maximize power (i.e., military strength) because every increment of power increases their chances of survival in an

anarchic system. Therefore there are virtually no status quo powers.<sup>17</sup> Only in the rare case when a state reaches the rank of hegemon does the drive for power relax and the state become satisfied with the status quo. There may be occasional lulls before then because of a lack of opportunity to expand, but the desire for power remains and will be reactivated when circumstances permit.

Mearsheimer does make an important theoretical contribution in “bringing the revisionist state back in,” thus satisfying Randall Schweller’s plea.<sup>18</sup> Mearsheimer and Schweller are correct that Waltzian neorealism is primarily a theory about how defensively oriented states behave in response to structural constraints. Mearsheimer enlarges the scope of neorealist theory by providing a theoretical rationale for the behavior of revisionist states, one that also locates causation in international system structure. Starting from this similarity, the two theories could work in tandem—the one chiefly explaining the security behavior of status quo powers, the other the behavior of revisionist states. A given state might be oriented offensively in some situations and defensively in others; the two theories then would alternate in explaining its behavior. The dynamics of the two models tend to interact. Balancing by status quo powers, for example, closes off avenues for expansion by revisionist states; buckpassing by status quo states may open up such opportunities. When offensive opportunities are blocked, aggressive states may not just “lie low” but actively participate in defensive balancing against their rivals. A balancing coalition may move beyond mere defeat of an aggressive state to offensive action designed to weaken it. There is already a good deal of overlap between these two realist theories and a potential for more.<sup>19</sup> The overlap can be exploited to deal with mixed motives and situations . . .

### **Balancing and passing the buck: the theory**

Mearsheimer’s offensive realist states are not on the offensive all the time. Occasionally they are faced with having to deter and contain a rival that seeks to gain power at their expense. In that defensive role, they have a choice between two strategies—balancing and buck-passing. Balancing means acting to preserve an existing distribution of power (e.g., by supporting a state that is challenged by a revisionist state). Buck-passing is to hold back and take no action, with the intent of shifting the burden of resistance onto an ally or some other state. The choice, Mearsheimer argues, will turn on the structure of the system and geography. There are three possible system structures: bipolar, balanced multipolar, and unbalanced multipolar.<sup>20</sup> The bipolar system is uninteresting because buck-passing is impossible—there is no one to “catch” a buck passed by a superpower. Buck-passing is most attractive in a balanced multipolar system because, with roughly equal capabilities, each great power individually can hold off an aggressor, and is therefore capable of “accepting” the buck. In an unbalanced system, when one state is markedly more powerful than its neighbors (a potential hegemon), those neighbors are too weak to accept the buck, so everyone will have a strong common interest in balancing against the powerful state. But buck-passing occurs even in an unbalanced system and is the “clearly preferred” strategy, Mearsheimer concludes, based on his historical cases (p. 160).

The reasons buck-passing is preferred, he speculates, are threefold. First, it is cheap: The cost of fighting is borne by the ally and oneself takes a “free ride.” Second, the aggressor and the buck-catcher may get involved in a long and debilitating war that leaves the buck-passer stronger than both. Third, if a state faces several adversaries, it may employ buck-passing to tackle them sequentially.

The chief drawback to passing the buck is, of course, that the designated buck-catcher might fail to resist the aggressor, or resist unsuccessfully, leaving the buck-passer in the field

alone with the aggressor. Thus the Soviet Union found itself all alone with Germany in 1940, after France and Britain failed to catch the buck that the Soviet Union passed them in 1939 (p. 161). Mearsheimer does not emphasize what presumably is the central trade-off in choosing between balancing and buck-passing: maximization of deterrence at the cost of certain involvement if deterrence fails (balancing) versus less effective deterrence plus a greater chance of staying out of war if it occurs (buck-passing).

The geographical variables are chiefly whether the aggressor and the threatened states share a common border, and whether they are separated by water. When challenger and defender are contiguous on land, balancing will be favored because otherwise the challenger might easily overrun the defender. When they are not contiguous, and especially when they are separated by water, buck-passing will be frequent because there is a good chance the immediate defender can defend itself without aid (pp. 271–272).

In sum, balancing will be most strongly favored in an unbalanced multipolar system when the immediate protagonists are neighbors on land. Buck-passing will be the strategy of choice in a balanced system, especially when the defender is either insular or located at some distance from the challenger.

This subtheory of offensive realism is innovative and interesting in several ways. First, it posits two differently structured multipolar systems, whereas Waltz considers only one—implicitly a system of equal powers. Mearsheimer's unbalanced multipolarity might be considered a model of the contemporary "unipolarity," although he does not interpret it that way.

Second, his melding of geographical factors with comparative capabilities is a welcome improvement over other analyses that too often ignore the importance of geography. Mearsheimer devotes an entire chapter to this subject, emphasizing "the stopping power of water" and the superiority of land forces over naval and air power.

Third, Mearsheimer finds little empirical support or theoretical merit for "bandwagoning"—allying with rather than against a powerful state—which some theorists consider the opposite of balancing. Although minor states may have no other choice, great powers rarely bandwagon. Mearsheimer gives a peculiar reason for this rarity: Bandwagoning, he says, entails shifting the distribution of power in the stronger ally's favor, which "violates the basic canon of offensive realism—that states maximize relative power" (p. 163). Bandwagoning means "conceding that [the] formidable new partner will gain a disproportionate share of the spoils they conquer together" (pp. 162–163). But it is hard to see how joining up with a more powerful state would necessarily entail a sacrifice in relative gains. Why not a proportionate sharing of the spoils? Or a disproportionate share to the joiner, who might have provided the last crucial increment of power to achieve victory? Indeed Waltz asserts a different reason for the infrequency of bandwagoning: "If states wished to maximize power, they would join the stronger side and we would see not balances forming but a world hegemony forged. This does not happen because balancing, not bandwagoning, is the behavior induced by the system. The first concern of states is not to maximize power, but to maintain their positions in the system."<sup>21</sup> Thus Mearsheimer and Waltz arrive at the same conclusion—that bandwagoning is a rare occurrence—but by using different assumptions about motivation: power maximizing versus power balancing. Of the two, Waltz's reasoning is the more plausible . . .

## **Conclusion**

*The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* is a pessimistic book, even as realist books go. Of course there is nothing wrong with pessimism if it is based on empirical truth and solid



logic. The trouble here is in the logic: Although it is coherent and without obvious inconsistency, it is sometimes pushed to extremes. Exhibit A in this respect is the claim that all great powers all the time are primarily concerned with maximizing power so as to maximize their security. Can it really be true that the world is condemned to a future of constant conflict and power struggles simply because of its anarchic political system and the desire of its units to survive? Are great powers really as ambitious, self-centered, and single-minded as this hypothesis implies? Granted that security seeking will be natural in such a system, is there any compelling reason why the search must persist *à l'outrance* until the searcher dominates its neighbors?<sup>22</sup>

Mearsheimer's unremitting focus on power-security competition among great powers necessarily means that many aspects of international politics normally considered essential are either given short shrift or omitted entirely. Conversely, the struggle for power assumes a bloated role far beyond what might be considered "realistic." Most conspicuously slighted in the analysis are the nonsecurity interests of states, such as advancement of an ideology, national unification, or protection of human rights. There is no mention of transnational movements such as terrorism and religious and ethnic strife. The book slights norms, institutions, and most kinds of interstate cooperation. Domestic politics are entirely omitted. Some might argue that these are topics that Mearsheimer, as a realist, should not be required to address. That depends, however, on how much distortion has been introduced by omitting them. In my view, too much, unless the power-maximizing claim is considerably modified.

There are two salient ways of modifying this claim: via a marginal utility calculation or an ideal-type model. In the first, states weigh costs and risks against security and other benefits when they decide whether to attempt expansion. Some of the costs and risks, as well as some of the benefits, will normally be in nonsecurity coin. Some will be anticipations of costs that may be imposed by other actors in resistance. Some of the benefits may be reduced, as security goals are pared down to match the limits of anticipated power. These considerations and qualifications amount to approaching security decisions as problems in maximizing marginal utility. The original hypothesis is deflated to "great powers expand until marginal costs begin to exceed marginal benefits." Such a hypothesis, obviously, is less extreme, more embracing, and more plausible—even if less parsimonious—than the original claim.<sup>23</sup>

The ideal-type model would grant the original claim the status of "initial working hypothesis"; something not intended as a statement of empirical truth but as a benchmark from which deviations might be identified and measured. Few social scientists present their theories explicitly in this form, and Mearsheimer does not do so. What they do, and what Mearsheimer does, is to state the theory as a sufficient explanation of its subject matter, leaving it up to the reader to understand that it is really only a partial explanation (and to keep his grain of salt handy). The ideal-type model preserves the initial hypothesis intact, but only as a point of departure for more "realistic" estimates.

The seeming exaggerations in Mearsheimer's theory make his historical cases crucial. The cases do show a high degree of congruence with the theory. Several great powers were expansionist on a big scale over a substantial part of their history. One notices, however, that all Eurasian revisionists, from Napoleon to Hitler to Tojo, were eventually blocked through the operation of the balance of power. None reached the finish line in Mearsheimer's race. Only the United States, in the Western Hemisphere, became a hegemon, against weak opposition. Thus it would appear that balance of power trumps power maximization.

Such quibbles aside, this is an excellent book. It is a clear and forceful exposition of offensive realist theory. It enriches alliance theory, advances new insights into geography,



and argues cogently for the superiority of land power over naval and air power. It does not supersede Waltz's broader and more moderate neorealist theory, although it employs many of the same assumptions. Rather it complements Waltz, chiefly by introducing a theoretical rationale for revisionist states. This creates a potential for integrating offensive and defensive realist theory. Perhaps it is time to end the proliferation of labels and theories in the realist camp and add up what we all have in common.

## Notes

- 1 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979); and Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948 and later editions). Other traditional (classical) realist works are E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939* (London: Macmillan, 1946); Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Scribner's, 1932); Nicholas Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1942); and Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins, 1962).
- 2 The label "structural" is sometimes applied to Waltz's theory, but the "English school," led by Barry Buzan, has claimed that label for its modification of Waltz. See Buzan, Charles Jones, and Richard Little, *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). Waltz himself uses the two terms interchangeably.
- 3 Examples of offensive realism include John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No.1 (Summer 1990), pp. 5–57; Eric J. Labs, "Beyond Victory: Offensive Realism and the Expansion of War Aims," *Security Studies*, Vol. 6, No.4 (December 1997), pp. 1–49; Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998).
- 4 Besides Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, other examples of defensive realism include Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No.2 (January 1978), pp. 167–214; Sean M. Lynn-Jones, "Realism and America's Rise: A Review Essay," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No.2 (Fall 1998), pp. 157–183; Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991); Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984); Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: The Structure of Power and the Roots of War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999); and Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991). For surveys of the various branches of realism, see Stephen G. Brooks, "Dueling Realisms," *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No.3 (Summer 1997), pp. 445–477; Colin Elman, "Horses for Courses: Why Not Neorealist Theories of Foreign Policy?" *Security Studies*, Vol. 6, No.1 (Autumn 1996), pp. 7–53; Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller, "Preface," in Michael E. Brown, Lynn-Jones, and Miller, eds., *The Perils of Anarchy: Contemporary Realism and International Security* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995); Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, "Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No.3 (Winter 2000/01), pp. 128–161; and Benjamin Frankel, "Restating the Realist Case: An Introduction," *Security Studies*, Vol. 5, No.3 (Spring 1996), pp. xiv–xx. Jack Donnelly provides a trenchant critique in *Realism and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). It could be argued that there are two cross-cutting dichotomies: classical realism versus neorealism, and offensive realism versus defensive realism. From that perspective, Mearsheimer and Waltz are both neorealists, the former offensive, the latter defensive.
- 5 Gideon Rose coined the term "neoclassical realism" in "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics*, Vol. 51, No.1 (October 1998), pp. 144–172. Charles L. Glaser calls himself a "contingent realist" in "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1994/95), pp. 50–90. Richard Rosecrance proposes "specific" and "generalist" strands of realism in "Has Realism Become Cost-Benefit Analysis? A Review Essay," *International Security*, Vol. 26, No.2 (Fall 2001), pp. 132–155.

- 6 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001). Subsequent references to this book appear parenthetically in the text.
- 7 Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, chap. 1.
- 8 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 126.
- 9 Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Press, 1962), p. 84.
- 10 Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory," in Robert I. Rotberg and Theodore K. Rabb, eds., *The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 40.
- 11 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 127.
- 12 John H. Herz, "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (January 1950), pp. 157–180.
- 13 The literature on the security dilemma is huge, but two leading sources are Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma"; and Charles L. Glaser, "The Security Dilemma Revisited," *World Politics*, Vol. 50, No.2 (October 1997), pp. 171–201.
- 14 Mearsheimer does not explicitly relate the severity of the security dilemma to the offense–defense balance in military technology. He does assume, however, that great powers "inherently possess some offensive military capability" (p. 30), and he faults "some defensive realists" for exaggerating the superiority of the defense (p. 39). Also, his treatment of geographic factors implies a sensitivity to the offense–defense balance (chap. 4). For a comprehensive survey of the literature on this topic, see Sean M. Lynn-Jones, "Offense–Defense Theory and Its Critics," *Security Studies*, Vol. 4, No.4 (Summer 1995), pp. 660–695.
- 15 Waltz, "The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory," pp. 43–44.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- 17 Mearsheimer notes an apparent contradiction in Morgenthau's theory between a universal "lust for power" and the existence of status quo states (pp. 408–409). Barry Posen, a defensive realist, writes that status quo states are "the rule rather than the exception." See Posen, *Sources of Military Doctrine*, p. 69.
- 18 Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No.1 (Summer 1994), pp. 72–108. Schweller's revisionist states are different from Mearsheimer's, however, because they have nonsecurity as well as security goals.
- 19 A similar suggestion for integrating defensive and offensive realism is made by Lynn-Jones, in "Realism and America's Rise," pp. 181–182. Jack Donnelly sees offensive realism and defensive realism not as competitors but as "different derivations from the realist hard core." The greatest theoretical need, he declares, is a theory focused on motivation, one that can provide an account "of when states are likely to seek to improve and when they will seek to preserve their position." See Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations*, pp. 64–65, 76.
- 20 The terms "balanced" and "unbalanced" power refer to the distribution of power—latent and actual military capabilities—between the great powers in a system, not the formation or nonformation of defensive coalitions.
- 21 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 126.
- 22 Arnold Wolfers would answer no to this question: "Depending on the circumstances, countries in this category [of seeking only self-preservation] may run the whole gamut from a frantic concern with the enhancement of power at one extreme to complete indifference to power at the other." Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration*, p. 97.
- 23 Wolfers puts it well: "Policy-makers must decide whether a specific increment of security is worth the specific additional deprivations which its attainment through power requires." *Ibid.* p. 91. For a similar formulation, see Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, p. 107.

# The “poster child for offensive realism”

## America as a global hegemon

*Christopher Layne*

From: *Security Studies* 12, no. 2 (Winter 2002/03): 120–64.

Is the United States a global hegemon? If so, will American primacy be sustainable in the twenty-first century? Is offshore balancing a good grand strategic alternative to primacy? For more than a decade, these questions have been at the heart of a discussion among academic students of strategic studies, and foreign policy analysts about American grand strategy.<sup>1</sup> That conversation has focused on American hegemony (what some call primacy), and how—or whether—to maintain it. Now, however, this conversation seems certain to intensify into a full-fledged debate for two reasons. First, the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, and the resulting war on terrorism—and the U.S. military campaign against Iraq—raise important long term questions about U.S. primacy. Second, publication of John J. Mearsheimer’s *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*—which engages directly the issue of American hegemony, and the alternatives to it—will serve as an intellectual catalyst for the reexamination of American grand strategy.<sup>2</sup>

Surely the most important contribution to the realist literature on international relations theory since Kenneth Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics*, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics* is a powerful reaffirmation of realism’s continuing relevance, and for this all realist scholars are in Mearsheimer’s debt.<sup>3</sup> This article, however, is not a traditional “review essay” of *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. Instead of offering a comprehensive critique of Mearsheimer’s argument, I propose to focus narrowly on his arguments about U.S. grand strategy. Although in *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Mearsheimer presents his take on neorealist theory—offensive realism—this is much more than just a book about IR theory. In *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Mearsheimer also has a lot to say about American grand strategy. Good theories both explain and predict, and Mearsheimer uses offensive realism to do both: he explains past U.S. grand strategy, and he also predicts America’s future grand strategic behavior.<sup>4</sup> His explanation and predictions are based on three key claims. First, he says that the United States is not a global hegemon, but only a hegemon in its own region, the Western Hemisphere. Second, he says that in grand strategic terms, the United States is, in fact, an offshore balancer with respect to Europe and northeast Asia. As such, it intervenes militarily in those regions only when local power balances appear incapable of thwarting the rise of a potential regional hegemon. Third, he claims that the United States does not become militarily involved in Europe and northeast Asia for the purpose of maintaining peace and stability in those regions. I take issue with these three claims. I believe the evidence shows both that the United States is a global hegemon, and that although it *should* be an offshore balancer, in reality it is *not*. Moreover, precisely because it is a global hegemon, since the Second World War, the need to maintain peace and stability within Europe and northeast Asia—not the goal of stopping hegemons from emerging in those regions—has been the primary rationale for the American military presence in those regions. Our disagreement on

these issues is not an “academic” debate. It makes a huge difference in the real world whether the United States is a global hegemon or a regional one, and whether it actually is an offshore balancer, or a regional stabilizer and peacekeeper in Europe and northeast Asia . . .

### **The strange disappearance of unipolarity: Mearsheimer and American grand strategy**

The conventional wisdom often gets many things wrong, but it sure seems to have been right about one thing. After the Soviet Union’s collapse, the United States was left standing as the sole remaining great power in the international system, and the distribution of power in the international political system was transformed from bipolarity to unipolarity. Unsurprisingly, then, much of the discussion about U.S. grand strategy for the last decade has been about the “unipolar moment,” and American primacy.<sup>5</sup> Although frequently clashing about the implications of U.S. primacy, nearly all the participants in this conversation have taken it for granted that unipolarity, and America’s global hegemony are joined at the hip. Like love and marriage, or horse and carriage, you cannot have one without the other. Or so we have thought, because Mearsheimer takes on both of these “givens.” Although he is deeply concerned with the effects of bipolar and multipolar systems on international stability (and on states’ grand strategies), he has nary a word to say about the impact on the international system of a unipolar distribution of power.<sup>6</sup> As if that omission were not jarring enough, Mearsheimer delivers a second jolt when he states that the United States today is not a global hegemon—which will strike many as a geopolitical equivalent of the proverbial headline, “man bites dog.”

Although Mearsheimer’s views about unipolarity, and American hegemony surely are iconoclastic, they flow inexorably from the logic of the tightly reasoned argument presented in *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. The point of departure is Mearsheimer’s sophisticated version of offensive realism. Building on five “bedrock” assumptions about the nature of international politics, he argues that states are compelled to maximize their power in order to attain security. He makes a clear, and extraordinarily compelling case, that great powers live in a world where fear and insecurity are pervasive. Unlike the movie protagonist played by Kevin Costner in *No Way Out*, however, for great powers there *is* a way out: “states quickly understand that the best way to ensure their survival is to be the most powerful state in the system.”<sup>7</sup> For great powers, the way to break out of the “security dilemma” is to be like LeRoy Brown: to be “badder than old King Kong, and meaner than a junk yard dog”—that is, to become a hegemon. What is a hegemon, exactly? Mearsheimer tells us with crystal clarity: “A hegemon is a state that is so powerful that it dominates all the other states in the system. In essence, a hegemon is the only great power in the system.”<sup>8</sup> Most commentators on U.S. grand strategy would say this description fits the United States today to a “T.”

It is at this point, however, that Mearsheimer says not so fast, and introduces a very big qualification into his theory of offensive realism. While it is true, he says, that the logic of offensive realism suggests that great powers will seek global hegemony, there are, he argues, nearly insuperable obstacles to attaining it.<sup>9</sup> In fact, he says “there never has been a global hegemon, and there is not likely to be one anytime soon.”<sup>10</sup> Because global hegemony is out of reach, about the best a great power can hope for, Mearsheimer says, is to become a hegemon in its *own region*.<sup>11</sup> So, what exactly is it that prevents great powers from gaining global hegemony? The answer, according to Mearsheimer is geography—specifically what he pithily calls the “stopping power of water.”<sup>12</sup> In the argot of military strategists, the

problem is one of power projection: the farther a state goes from home, the less of a wallop its military punch packs.

The fact that states must settle for being king of the hill in their own region does not mean they turn a blind eye to geopolitical events in other regions. On the contrary, they keep a close watch on what happens elsewhere. “States that achieve regional hegemony,” Mearsheimer says, “seek to prevent great powers in other regions from duplicating their feat.”<sup>13</sup> The reason regional hegemons want to thwart the emergence of “peer competitors” in other regions is because they worry that these peer competitors could make trouble for them in their own backyard.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Mearsheimer argues, states that dominate their own region act as offshore balancers with respect to other regions, which means that when it comes to stopping the rise of peer competitors in other regions, their preferred strategy is “buck-passing.” Buck-passing is a strategy of standing aside, and letting the local great powers in the area have the first crack at checking a would-be regional hegemon. Only if they are unable to do the job on their own will an offshore balancer join the fray in another region, and throw its weight into the scale to ensure that the aspiring hegemon there is defeated.<sup>15</sup>

Having set out his theory, and its underlying logic, Mearsheimer uses it to explain American grand strategy. Consistent with his theory, he claims that the United States is not now, and never has been, a global hegemon, but rather is a regional hegemon in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, he says, the United States is the only great power in the history of the modern international state system successfully to attain regional hegemony.<sup>17</sup> The United States cannot be a global hegemon, because Europe and East Asia are a long way off, and it is way too difficult for the United States to project across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans the amount of military power it would need to be preponderant in those regions.<sup>18</sup> As a regional hegemon, the United States plays the role of offshore balancer with respect to Europe and East Asia.<sup>19</sup> These two roles fit like hand and glove and define the basic objective of U.S. grand strategy, which, Mearsheimer says, “has traditionally been to dominate the western hemisphere while not permitting another great power to dominate Europe or Northeast Asia.”<sup>20</sup>

As an offshore balancer, the United States stands on the sidelines militarily while geopolitical competitions unfold in Europe and East Asia.<sup>21</sup> Only when buck passing appears to be failing does the United States step up to the plate and intervene militarily in Europe and East Asia;<sup>22</sup> and once it has successfully swatted down a bid for hegemony in Europe or East Asia, it is over, over there, for the United States, and American troops come back home. When there is no longer a hegemonic threat to be defeated, Mearsheimer says, the United States does not loiter on the street corners of Europe and East Asia for the purpose of maintaining peace and stability in those regions.<sup>23</sup> Applying this logic to predict the likely course of American grand strategy in the next decade, he says that because no contender for European hegemony is likely to emerge, American forces will come home from Europe.<sup>24</sup> He makes a similar prediction with respect to East Asia: unless China finds itself in a position to make a serious bid for hegemony in East Asia (which may, or may not, happen), American forces will pull back from the region in coming years . . .

### **Would a hegemon by any other name . . . ?**

There is something perplexing about Mearsheimer’s view of the stopping power of water. Apparently, water stops the United States from imposing its power on others in distant regions, but it does not stop them from threatening American primacy in the Western Hemisphere. In fact, the opposite is true. Only an insular power like the United States can



successfully project its power into distant regions and bid for global hegemony. When it comes to attaining regional hegemony—the first step toward global hegemony—the deck is stacked against continental powers, which explains why no continental power has ever gone on to become a global hegemon. In the race for global hegemony, continental powers are big-time long shots for two reasons. First, continental great powers historically have had their hands full dealing with each other. Living cheek by jowl with powerful, and rapacious neighbors, they first have to take care of business at home. Continental powers live in constant fear that one among them might attain regional hegemony, which is why the first aim of their strategy is to make sure that does not happen. Second, precisely for this reason, continental great powers are in no position to acquire the kind of power projection capabilities they would need to challenge a distant regional hegemon successfully, which is exactly what they need to do to become a global hegemon. To survive, these powers historically have needed to have big armies. Even the wealthiest and most powerful continental states have found that they lack the means to be dominant on land (to achieve hegemony in their own neighborhood), while simultaneously being dominant at sea (to challenge distant regional hegemons). On the other hand, precisely because it has no rivals in its own region to worry about, the United States has been free to concentrate its resources and ambitions on becoming a global hegemon. The logic [of] offensive realism predicts that it would do so.

As we already have seen, as Mearsheimer lays it out, the pure logic of offensive realism is that great powers can attain security only by eliminating their rivals—that is by becoming a hegemon.<sup>25</sup> On its own terms, the logic of offensive realism should predict that great powers will seek global hegemony, thus solving their security dilemma by establishing themselves as the only great power in international politics. However, as we know, Mearsheimer draws back from the compelling logic of his argument, and introduces the qualification that because global hegemony is out of reach, the most a great power can hope to accomplish is becoming the hegemon in its own region. Once a great power becomes a regional hegemon, he says, it has “achieved the pinnacle of power.”<sup>26</sup> At that point, further expansion is impossible and it becomes a status quo power. Regional hegemony, however, is the geostrategic equivalent of lite beer—almost, but not quite (or as Dr. Evil would say, regional hegemony is the margarine, the diet coke of hegemony). By ruling out the possibility of global hegemony, Mearsheimer transforms offensive realism into diet offensive realism. Robust offensive realism, on the other hand, follows the theory to its logical conclusion: for a great power, “being all that you can be” means thrusting for global primacy. Diet offensive realism and robust offensive realism part company on the question of whether great powers “max out” when they attain regional primacy, or take it to the next level and seek global dominance.

The proposition that regional hegemons are status quo powers raises two huge questions. One . . . is empirical. The second question is theoretical. The logic of offensive realism is difficult to reconcile with the contention that regional hegemons are status quo powers. Indeed, it is difficult for Mearsheimer to do so. The problem here is that the logic of offensive realism holds that states can never afford to be satisfied with a given amount of power; instead, they must constantly seek to increase their power.<sup>27</sup> Given offensive realism’s logic, it is difficult to understand why, once a great power becomes a regional hegemon, the stopping of water transforms it from a power maximizer into a status quo power. Indeed, Mearsheimer himself admits that a regional hegemon really cannot be a status quo power after all, because it must prevent other great powers from achieving hegemony in distant regions. As he says, “if a regional hegemon is confronted with a peer competitor, it would no longer be a status quo power.”<sup>28</sup>



There is a palpable tension in Mearsheimer’s argument: if regional hegemons are satisfied, why do they worry so much about what happens geopolitically in distant regions, and why are they tempted to go mucking about in them? Mearsheimer has an answer, but it is not entirely satisfying. He says that “the ideal situation for any great power is to be the only regional hegemon in the world,” a distribution of power that “it would go to considerable lengths to preserve.”<sup>29</sup> If a great power is so much more powerful than the others, however, at what point does its regional primacy shade into global hegemony? Moreover, if maintaining this privileged distribution of power is the overriding strategic imperative for a regional hegemon, why should we assume that a regional hegemon will trust to buck-passing to prevent another great power from becoming a hegemon in a distant region? If, as Mearsheimer says, a regional hegemon confronted with a distant “peer competitor” rival “would go to considerable lengths to weaken and maybe even destroy its distant rival,” why would it not act preventively to knock down such a rival before it could pose a serious problem?<sup>30</sup> After all, the heart of offensive realism is that the best defense is a good offense.<sup>31</sup> The way to deal with a possible distant “peer competitor” is to strangle the baby in the crib. According to Mearsheimer, “great powers recognize that the best way to ensure their security is to secure hegemony now, thus eliminating any possibility of a challenge by another great power.”<sup>32</sup> Its [*sic*] pretty obvious that notwithstanding the claim that water stops, in a Mearsheimerian world strategists are not willing to bet the farm that the stopping power of water really will stop, which means that to be secure a regional hegemon must prevent the emergence of distant rivals. “Eliminating the possibility of challenge” by a distant regional hegemon, however, implicitly suggests that the kind of hegemony a great power must have to be secure is global, not regional. Here we get to the nub: the causal *logic* of offensive realism suggests that regional hegemons cannot be status quo powers. That is, they cannot afford to rest on their twin laurels as the dominant power in their own regions, and as an offshore balancer with respect to distant regions.

Robust offensive realism suggests that global hegemony is the best grand strategic response to the fear and uncertainty that are endemic to international politics. Logically, a great power should want to go all the way and become a global hegemon, because the best way to deter others from threatening it is to amass overwhelming power, and to eliminate potential rivals (*before* they become serious threats). Becoming a global hegemon is the best way to hedge against uncertainty about others’ intentions, and about their present and future capabilities.<sup>33</sup> The only surefire way to gain security is by putting the competition out of business—by eliminating its rivals, or subjugating, or subordinating them.<sup>34</sup> Because security is always precarious in anarchy, great powers have strong incentives to “take-out” rivals. “Anticipatory violence”—do it to them before they can do it you—is robust offensive realism’s prescribed strategy.<sup>35</sup> By gaining global hegemony, therefore, a state not only eliminates extant threats to its security, but also minimizes the risk that it might be challenged in the future . . .

. . . [T]he historical record shows that since the Second World War, the United States has acted in grand strategy pretty much as this robust version offensive realism predicts. That is, the United States has been a global hegemon, not an offshore balancer. The reason it has been able to attain global hegemony is that the stopping power of water has proved to be not much of a barrier to the projection of American power into Europe and northeast Asia. Here is another problem with using the logic of diet offensive [*sic*] to describe America’s grand strategic behaviour. While admitting that the United States is “the most powerful nation on the planet today,” Mearsheimer contends that the United States does not dominate Europe and northeast Asia in the same way it dominates the Western Hemisphere,

because of the difficulty of projecting power across the oceans.<sup>36</sup> Yet, following the Second World War, the United States solved the problem of the stopping power of water. How? By maintaining large numbers of forward deployed troops and prepositioned materiel in Europe and northeast Asia, creating an elaborate network of bases in those regions, and creating a logistical infrastructure that can support the rapid projection of additional U.S. power to these regions. The U.S. military presence in those regions has enabled it to dominate them, especially Western Europe.

Actually, contrary to the logic of diet offensive realism, it is easier for the United States to project power to Europe or northeast Asia than to project massive power to South America. Europe, for example, is closer to the continental United States than are Brazil and Argentina. To project significant power into the heart of South America, the United States would run smack dab into the stopping power of water, because it cannot project its power into that region by land. Moreover, the United States would have to deploy its forces into South America without being able to draw upon the bases and logistical infrastructure that exist to facilitate deployments to Europe and East Asia. Really, using Mearsheimer's own metric it is a lot easier for the United States to dominate Europe, East Asia, and the Persian Gulf than it is for it to dominate the Western Hemisphere. In other words, the stopping power of water does not stop the United States from being the dominant power in the three most critical regions of the world. That dominance is what makes the United States a global hegemon . . .

## Notes

- 1 The best overview of this discussion is Michael E. Brown, Owen R. Cote, Sean M. Lynn-Jones, and Steven E. Miller, eds., *America's Strategic Choices*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Mass.: MIT Press, 2000).
- 2 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001). This book, moreover, will have an impact that reaches beyond academic circles. Because Mearsheimer has an unrivaled gift for expressing complex ideas in easy-to-grasp, everyday language, this book is accessible to a general readership. For a summary of his arguments pertaining to American grand strategy drawn from *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, see John J. Mearsheimer, "The Future of the American Pacifier," *Foreign Affairs* 80, no. 5 (September/October 2001): 46–61.
- 3 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979).
- 4 Where neorealism is concerned, the line that demarcates a theory of international politics from a theory of foreign policy (or grand strategy) is murky. That is unsurprising, because the foreign policies (or grand strategies) of great powers result from the interaction of systemic constraints with unit level factors. On neorealism as both a theory of grand strategy and a theory of international politics, see Colin Elman, "Horses for Courses: Why *Not* Neorealist Theories of Foreign Policy?" *Security Studies* 6, no. 1 (autumn 1996): 7–53; Kenneth N. Waltz, "International Politics is Not Foreign Policy," *Security Studies* 6, no. 1 (autumn 1996): 54–57; Colin Elman, "Cause, Effect, and Consistency: A Response to Kenneth Waltz," *Security Studies* 6, no. 1 (autumn 1996): 58–61. Mearsheimer states explicitly that his theory of offensive realism "can be used to explain both the foreign policy of individual states and international outcomes." Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 422 n. 60.
- 5 See, Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997); Coral Bell, "American Ascendancy and the Promise of Concert," *The National Interest*, no. 57 (fall 1999): 55–63; Samuel P. Huntington, "The Lonely Superpower," *Foreign Affairs* 78, no. 2 (March/April 1999): 35–49; Robert Kagan, "The Benevolent Empire," *Foreign Policy*, no. 111 (summer 1998): 24–35; Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs: America and the World* 70, no. 1 (1990/91): 23–33; Zalmay Khalilzad, "Losing the Moment? The United States and the World After the Cold War," *Washington Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (spring 1995): 87–107; Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise," *International Security* 17, no. 4 (spring 1993): 5–51; Michael Mastanduno, "Preserving the Unipolar Moment: Realist Theories and U.S. Grand Strategy," *International*

- Security* 21, no. 4 (spring 1997): 49–88; Charles William Maynes, “The Perils of (and for) an Imperial America,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 111 (summer 1998): 36–49; Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International Politics,” *International Security* (fall 1994): 5–41; William C. Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” *International Security* 24, no. 1 (summer 1999): 4–41.
- 6 Omitting unipolarity, Mearsheimer says there are three different distributions of power in the international system: bipolarity, unbalanced multipolarity, and balanced multipolarity. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 335. There is no index listing for unipolarity. Unipolarity, however, is mentioned cursorily three times in the text. At p. 40, Mearsheimer says that even at the height of the mid-nineteenth century *Pax Britannica* the distribution of power in the international system was multipolar not unipolar. At p. 345 he says “there are no meaningful security threats to the dominant power in a unipolar system” Finally, at p. 381, Mearsheimer states the present distribution of power in the international system is not unipolar, because the United States is not a global hegemon.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 33.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 40.
- 9 As Mearsheimer puts it, “Every great power would like to dominate the world, but none has ever had or is likely to have the military capability to become a global hegemon” (*ibid.*, 236).
- 10 *Ibid.*, 41.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 41, 140–41.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 40–42.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 41.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 41–42, 236–37.
- 15 *Ibid.* As Mearsheimer puts it (236–37), “the ultimate goal of great powers is to achieve regional hegemony and block the rise of peer competitors in distant areas of the globe. In essence, states that gain regional hegemony act as offshore balancers in other regions. Nevertheless, those distant hegemonies usually prefer to let the local great powers check an aspiring hegemon, while they watch from the sidelines. Sometimes, however, this buck-passing strategy is not feasible, and the distant hegemon has to step in and balance against the rising power.”
- 16 *Ibid.*, 170, 235–37, 380–81.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 41, 141, 143, 237.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 41, 236.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 41, 237, 252–57; Mearsheimer, “The Future of the American Pacifier,” 46.
- 20 Mearsheimer, “The Future of the American Pacifier,” 46.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 252.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 235.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 386–87.
- 25 Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 34–35, 40.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 168.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 34–35.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 42.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 42.
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 35.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 31–36.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 35. Ashley J. Tellis’s subcategorization of hegemonic grand strategies is a potentially useful framework. Unfortunately, he neither elaborates on the differences between these subcategories nor does he define them. For my purposes, I would define these categories as follows. Elimination is self-explanatory. An example would be Rome’s extinguishing of Carthage at the end of the Second Punic War. Elimination of rivals would seem to be a relatively rare path to hegemony. Subjugation encompasses a state’s use of its military and economic capabilities to establish a relationship of dominance over its rivals. Often, but not always, subjugation is accomplished by defeating one’s rivals in war. By establishing a clear power advantage over its rival(s), a hegemon is able to circumscribe the rival’s autonomy, and reduce its material capabilities, thereby reducing the likelihood that a defeated rival will resurface as a future threat. Subordination is the most

interesting path to hegemony. Subordination is a subtle strategy that combines elements of both hard and soft power. The hegemon uses its hard power to define the power relationship between itself and others. The hegemon's hard power serves to circumscribe others' freedom of action and to dissuade, or prevent, them from developing their power capabilities to a point that would enable them to challenge the hegemon's preeminence. The hegemon uses its soft power to co-opt others and to legitimize its dominance over them. Subordination seems most closely to define U.S. grand strategy since 1945. Ashley J. Tellis, "The Drive for Domination" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1994), 11.

- 35 Tellis, "Drive for Domination," 349 et seq. As Hans Morgenthau wrote, "Since in a balance-of-power system all nations live in constant fear lest their rivals deprive them, at the first opportune moment, of their power position, all nations have a vital interest in anticipating such a development and doing unto the others what they do not want the others to do unto them" (Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6th ed [New York: Knopf, 1985], 228).
- 36 Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 41.

## 7 Rise and fall realism

Rise and fall realism is an outlier in modern realist research programs. It is the only one not to include a heavy dose of balance of power logic, and it unproblematically sees the international system as having a succession of leaders. What makes leadership a position worth fighting over is having the benefit of deciding the system's rules.

In rise and fall realism, international systems are most conflict-prone when potential challengers start to catch up with the leader. Gaps open and close because of differential growth mechanisms. Although different rise and fall realist theories rely on different mechanisms, they agree that something inside states causes them to grow at a faster or slower rate relative to one another.

Rise and fall realism suggests that the international system is most stable when one state is much more powerful than the others. By contrast, a system approaching balance suggests that a challenger is about to pass a leader, and hence major war becomes more likely. This is because, as the power of a declining hegemon and a rising challenger approach parity, a struggle over system leadership will occur. The declining state will be tempted to launch a preventive war before parity is reached, and/or the challenging state will initiate a war to achieve system leadership once it has attained superior power.

Rise and fall theories disagree on a number of points, such as whether it is the hegemon or challenger that initiates war, or what internal mechanisms (industrialization, economic and political innovation, etc.) drive differential growth. However, they mainly agree on the core argument that power parity is destabilizing, that leadership disputes following power transitions are often resolved by war, and that much of the history of international relations can be read as the successive rise and fall of great powers.

The readings selected for this chapter represent these basic principles, as well as capture the diversity that characterizes the research program. Organski's reading on "Power transition" provides one explanation for the onset of leadership changes. According to Organski, patterns of successive industrialization have caused states to grow and decline in relation to each other. A newly industrializing challenger will be growing faster than a hegemon that industrialized in a previous time period. Accordingly, the international system enters into a period of acute destabilization. Organski suggests that, as the two states reach power parity, the rising state may make a bid for hegemony by initiating war with the dominant power.

In their article, "Power shifts and problem shifts," Jack Levy and Jonathan DiCicco use Imre Lakatos' Method of Scientific Research Programs to assess the developments that have been made to Organski's power transition theory in recent years. The authors argue that power transition theory is based on a set of core assumptions that are quite different from those found in balance of power theories, like Waltz's neorealism. Most importantly, power

transition theory holds that the ordering principle of the international system is hierarchy, not anarchy. This belief has led power transition theorists to make claims that are in sharp contrast to those made by neorealists and defensive structural realists. Particularly important are those claims about the pacifying effects of hegemony and the destabilizing impact of power parity.

Robert Gilpin's theory of hegemonic war, described in the excerpts from his book *War and Change in World Politics*, shares with Organski's power transition theory the view that dominance is the least dangerous international configuration. Gilpin's theory, however, relies on a different explanation for changes in relative standing, and hence does not have the same scope conditions. Because Organski's differential growth mechanism is industrialization, his theory only applies during that time period. By contrast, Gilpin's mechanisms of political, economic and technological changes apply much more broadly. Hence, according to Gilpin, hegemonic wars have been the primary mechanism for international change since the beginning of recorded history. Unlike Organski, however, Gilpin suggests that war is initiated by a declining hegemon after a series of reform measures, such as increased taxation and curbs on spending, fail to stop its descent. These preventive wars, which Gilpin labels "hegemonic wars," are total in the respect that they encompass the entire international system and are characterized by the unrestrained application of material power.

The excerpt from Jack Levy's article, "Declining power and the preventive motivation for war," follows up on Gilpin's analysis by looking at the role that preventive war plays in the literature on power transitions and the causes of major war. While in agreement with Gilpin that declining states often launch preventive attacks to preserve their international standing, Levy contends that power transitions are neither necessary nor sufficient to bring about preventive wars. States consider many factors when weighing the decision to launch a preventive war, and their desire to fight while they can still win is only one of them. Levy suggests that it is often beliefs about what life will be like *after* a power transition has occurred that convinces a dominant state to adopt one policy course over another. Although rare, Levy offers an explanation for why some power transitions occur peacefully.

Finally, in "Neorealism and the myth of bipolar stability," Dale Copeland takes issue with a core prediction of neorealism: that bipolar systems are more peaceful than multipolar systems. Copeland's theory is an interesting synthesis that combines elements of rise and fall realism with structural realism. Unlike other variants of rise and fall realism, Copeland assumes that states worry about survival, not how to remain or become the system leader because of the benefits of that position. We nevertheless include his synthesis in the rise and fall camp because the main moving part in his theory is relative decline, especially in a bipolar system. Preventive war is a more attractive option in a bipolar world, according to Copeland, because a declining state need only defeat one other major power to preserve its standing in the international system. The prospect of having to topple several states at once makes preventive war a less appealing option in a multipolar system.



# Power transition

*A.F.K. Organski*

From: *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 12 (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 415–17.

The theory of power transition attempts to account for the shifts of power and the causes of conflict among nations. According to this theory, the spread of industrialization to different nations at different times and at differing rates provides the key to understanding the fundamental patterns of contemporary international relations.

## Stages of power transition

An industrializing nation undergoes a number of changes as it modernizes its economy. Typically, such a nation not only increases its wealth and its industrial strength but also grows in population and improves the efficiency of its political institutions. Since economic development, population size, social mobility, and political mobilization are among the major determinants of national power, an industrializing nation also increases its power, i.e., its ability to influence the behavior of other nations. It goes through a “power transition.”

This power transition can for convenience be divided into three stages, although in reality the process is continuous.

*Potential power.* First comes the “stage of potential power,” a preindustrial stage in which the population may be large or small and is often growing rapidly but in which the economy and the government are backward compared to more developed nations. The economy is primarily subsistence agriculture. Productivity and living standards are low, technical skills are few, and capital is extremely scarce. Governmental institutions are inefficient, and national unity is often, though not always, slight. Countries in this stage are often ruled by foreign conquerors or by small aristocracies; the common people participate little in national government except to pay taxes.

The human and material resources of such a nation are largely unorganized and only partly used; and the power of such a nation is slight compared to that of any industrial nation, although of course it may be greater than that of some other underdeveloped country.

The power of a preindustrial nation is largely potential, to be realized when and if it modernizes its economy and its government. For a nation with a large population, however, the size of its potential power may be great indeed. India, for example, by industrializing fully, would become one of the most powerful nations on earth; and other nations, recognizing this potential, grant India today some of the deference due to the power she may have tomorrow.

*Transitional growth.* The second stage of power transition is the “stage of transitional growth in power.” During this stage the nation is in transition from an agricultural to an industrial economy, and as it industrializes it grows in power.

Fundamental changes take place during this stage. Economic modernization brings higher productivity, increased national income, and higher living standards. Political modernization brings a larger and more efficient government bureaucracy and increases the control of the central government over the nation. The general public is more affected by governmental action and participates more in governmental activities, and nationalistic sentiment often reaches a high pitch. Population size generally increases rapidly, for modern conditions reduce the death rate sharply. Industrialization, urbanization, secularization, and other related changes alter the whole fabric of national life.

Many of these changes have the effect of increasing the nation's power, relative to both that of the other preindustrial nations it leaves behind and that of the already industrial nations it is beginning to catch up with. The speed of this gain in power and the degree to which it upsets the international community depend in large part upon the size of the nation and upon the speed with which it industrializes.

The Soviet Union provides a good example of a nation in the stage of transitional growth in power, although it is now at the end of this stage. Its rapid industrialization and concomitant rise in power have changed the whole focus of international relations in the mid-twentieth century.

*Power maturity.* The third stage of power transition is the "stage of power maturity," reached when a nation is highly industrial, as the United States and western Europe are today. Nations in this stage continue to change and to grow in wealth, efficiency, and size, but at a slower rate. At least, this has been the experience of the Western nations that have already reached power maturity. Presumably, the rate of economic advance will also slacken in the Soviet Union and eventually in China and other nations as they reach this point, but only the future can supply proof of this.

With power maturity the internal characteristics that give a nation power do not disappear, but in a race where everyone is running forward one may lose simply by slowing down. Power, after all, is relative, not absolute. Nations in the third stage lose *relative* power as other nations in the stage of transitional growth close the gap between them.

The effects of automation may give a further burst of power to nations in the stage of power maturity and allow them to maintain their power superiority longer than would otherwise be the case, but in the end automation will destroy the nation-state and open the way to new and different forms of political organization.

### **Effects on the distribution of power**

Had the entire world industrialized at the same time and at the same speed, there would have been great changes in international relations but no necessary major shifts in the distribution of power among nations. However, the industrial revolution, which began in England two hundred years ago and spread slowly through the West, has only recently swept into eastern Europe and Asia and has still to reach the majority of nations in the world.

The result has been that first one nation and then another has experienced a sudden spurt in power, as in a race where one runner after another goes into a brief sprint. These sudden sprints keep upsetting the distribution of power in the world, threatening the established international order and disturbing world peace. Increased power is constantly passing into the hands of nations who use it to challenge the existing leaders of the international community.

At any given time the nations of the world tend to be organized into an "international order," that is to say, a system of relationships that is fairly stabilized, with recognized

leaders, a recognized distribution of power and wealth, and recognized rules of trade, diplomacy, and war. Sometimes, as during most of the nineteenth century, there is only one international order. At other times, as at present, there may be two or more competing international orders.

The dominant international order is headed by the most powerful single nation on earth, formerly England, today the United States. In the years since the industrial revolution the rule of the dominant nation has been challenged by one newly industrialized nation after another. Sometimes the challenge has come from within the dominant international order, as when the United States took over world leadership from England. Sometimes it has come from the leader of a competing international order, as in the cases of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.

A recurring pattern can be seen in which new nations industrialize and experience an accompanying rapid growth in power only to find themselves dissatisfied with the place granted to them by the world leaders who industrialized ahead of them. When peaceful bids for a redistribution of wealth and power prove inadequate, past challengers have turned to war. In the past one hundred years major wars have been started by challengers as they approached, but before they reached, equal power with those they challenged.

Peace, then, is most assured when the dominant nation and its allies enjoy a huge preponderance of power over any possible challenger. War is most likely when the power of a challenger and its allies approaches equality with that of the world leaders who support the *status quo*.

## Evaluation

The major limitation of the concept of power transition is that it refers to a period extending roughly from 1750 to a time in the future (one may guess about 2050) when world-wide industrialization has been achieved. It does not apply to the years before 1750, when no nation was industrial, nor does it apply to a future in which all nations will possess highly developed economies.

The theory of the balance of power, on the other hand, may be more applicable to the preindustrial “dynastic” period, when there were many nations of roughly equivalent power, when nations were kings who could and did switch sides freely, and when nations increased their power primarily through clever diplomacy, alliances, and military conquests. Thus, each nation’s increase in power could be counterbalanced by similar international action on the part of its rivals.

However, it is clear that differential industrialization has created vast differences in the power of nations since the industrial revolution. There no longer exist many nations of roughly equal power, and it is no longer possible to balance power by shifting alliances. In the last two hundred years the usual state of affairs has been a vast preponderance of power in the hands of one leading nation. At most there have occasionally been two leading nations of almost equal power. Modern nations are not free to make and break alliances at will for power considerations (for example, to balance world power), because economic and military interdependence have tied nations together into international orders whose membership they cannot leave without great domestic as well as international changes.

Furthermore, balance of power situations, historically, have not aided the maintenance of peace. On the contrary, the greatest wars of modern history have occurred precisely at times when a challenging nation or coalition of nations has most nearly reached equal power with the leaders of the dominant international order. The great century of *Pax Britannica*

from 1815 to 1914 amply illustrates that peace comes with preponderant power, not with a balance of power.

The theory of the power transition, unlike the theory of the balance of power, assumes that industrial strength is one of the major determinants of a nation's power and that a nation may therefore increase its power greatly through internal changes in its economy, i.e., through industrialization. By proceeding from this basic assumption the theory of the power transition seems to explain some major developments in contemporary international politics far better than the outdated formulation of balance of power.

# The power transition research program

## A Lakatosian analysis

*Jonathan M. DiCicco and Jack S. Levy*

From: *Progress in International Relations Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 109–57.

### *... Power transition's hard core of irrefutable assumptions*

The central concept of Lakatosian MSRP [Methodology of Scientific Research Programs] is the hard core, which is a set of assumptions considered “‘irrefutable’ by the methodological decision of its protagonists” and not appropriate for empirical testing (Lakatos 1970, 133). Instead, researchers use these assumptions to construct a theoretical system, derive auxiliary hypotheses that constitute the protective belt around the hard core of the research program, and test those hypotheses empirically. “It is this protective belt of auxiliary hypotheses which has to bear the brunt of tests and get adjusted and re-adjusted” (p. 133) . . .<sup>1</sup>

Although Organski’s original statement of power transition theory does not contain an explicit list of assumptions that allows us to specify an unambiguous hard core of the research program, his critique of the assumptions of balance of power theory gives us some leverage for that task. Organski charges balance of power theorists with making two misguided assumptions: “nations are fundamentally static units whose power is not changed from within, and . . . nations have no permanent ties to each other but move about freely, motivated primarily by considerations of power.”<sup>2</sup> Organski emphasizes repeatedly that the first assumption fails to hold for the period since 1750. Rather, he argues, the impulses of nationalism and industrialization have transformed international politics such that changes in national power from within drive changes in the relations between states. Internal growth and development has supplanted the constant shifting of alliances as the primary mechanism for reconfiguring international political relationships.<sup>3</sup>

Organski also criticizes balance of power theory’s emphasis on alliance formation and dissolution as the primary mechanism for power redistribution and on the ease of making and breaking alliances.<sup>4</sup> He argues that ties between states in the industrializing period are far less flexible than during the preindustrial era for three reasons. First, industrialization and the development of a more liberal, free-trade order increased the interdependence of nations, making ties firmer. Second, alliance ties in the modern era require heavy investments—including arms transfers, building and maintenance of bases abroad, and equipment standardization—and consequently alliances are less transitory. Third, the growth of democracy and leaders’ appeals to constituents for support of their alignment policies makes it much harder for democratic states to reverse alliance commitments. Economically interdependent, militarily tied, and sentimentally bound nations cannot “switch sides” as easily as the dynastic states of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and early eighteenth centuries, and consequently alliances are not a primary means of enhancing national power.<sup>5</sup>

This discussion, along with more explicit statements in subsequent work,<sup>6</sup> suggest the following set of hard core (HC) assumptions in power transition theory:

(HC-1): States are the primary actors in international politics.<sup>7</sup>

(HC-2): State leaders are rational in their foreign policy choices.<sup>8</sup>

(HC-3): The international order is hierarchically organized under the leadership of a dominant power.

(HC-4): The rules governing the international political system are fundamentally similar to those governing domestic political systems.

(HC-5): Internal growth and development of states is the primary source of international change.

(HC-6): Alliance ties between states are relatively inflexible, and consequently alliances are not a primary means of enhancing national power.

. . . It is instructive to compare power transition theory's hard-core assumptions with those of realist balance of power theories. Although both assume that the key actors in the system are unitary and rational states, they differ in other important respects. Whereas balance of power theories treat both internal growth and alliances as sources of international change, power transition theory excludes alliances and treats internal growth as the only source of power and international change. The peripheral role of alliances in power transition theory is a major point of difference with balance of power realism, where alliances play an indispensable role . . .

In contrast to the standard neorealist assumption that anarchy is the key ordering principle of international relations,<sup>9</sup> power transition theory posits a hierarchically organized international order defined by both the distribution of power and the set of rules and common practices imposed by a dominant state. In some respects this distinction is rather thin and reflects merely semantic differences in the meanings that neorealists and power transition theorists attach to the key concepts of anarchy, hierarchy, and authority. Waltz concedes that international politics is characterized by some semblance of order, and power transition and other hegemonic theorists concede that order exists within a nominally anarchic system.<sup>10</sup>

For Waltz, however, order is a systemic effect, not a national strategy. It is a by-product of the "coaction of self-regarding units [i.e., states]. . . . No state intends to participate in the formation of a structure by which it and others will be constrained. International-political systems, like economic markets, are individualist in origin, spontaneously generated, and unintended."<sup>11</sup> In power transition theory, by contrast, order is the intended result of actions taken by a dominant state, which attempts to shape the international system in such a way that advances stability and enhances its own interests.<sup>12</sup> In balance of power theory, a single dominant state almost never arises because the balancing mechanism works to deter potential hegemons or to defeat them if deterrence fails.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to the Waltzian assumption that states are functionally undifferentiated and have similar goals, Organski argues that because states occupy different positions in the international hierarchy, they may have different goals.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, in contrast to the view often associated with classical realists such as Morgenthau and contemporary "offensive realists" such as Mearsheimer, Organski rejects the argument that all national goals reduce to the maximization of power (although he concedes that every state needs to maintain some minimum level of power to survive as a political entity).<sup>15</sup> The assumption of heterogeneous



state goals is consistent with Organski's argument that some but not all potential challengers may be satisfied with the existing international order and have no incentive to overturn the hierarchy even if they have the power to do so.<sup>16</sup>

The anarchy/hierarchy distinction is closely related to the question of the similarity of international and domestic political systems. Power transition theory's hard core assumes that the hierarchically-organized international order contains rules similar to rules of domestic political systems, "despite the absence of an enforceable code of international law."<sup>17</sup> This breaks from the explicit neorealist assumption that international politics and domestic politics are fundamentally dissimilar because the former is anarchic and the latter is hierarchical.<sup>18</sup> For these reasons we treat the power transition research program as a break in the hard core of balance of power realism.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Power transition's negative heuristic***

Lakatos's "negative heuristic" delineates the types of variables and models that ought to be shunned by researchers within a research program because they deviate from the assumptions of the hard core.<sup>20</sup> Power transition's hard core implies that researchers should not develop models that posit the importance of non-state actors, non-rational decision-making, the absence of order or rules in the international system, a sharp distinction between domestic politics and international politics, a static conception of national power, or the significance of alliances as sources of national power. In addition, Organski implies that researchers should avoid explanations that posit homogeneous motivations (including power maximization) across states.

### ***Power transition's positive heuristic***

Lakatos argued that programmatic research is further guided by the positive heuristic, "a partially articulated set of suggestions or hints" regarding the development of increasingly sophisticated models (pp. 134–138). These models generate hypotheses that constitute the protective belt and that should be empirically tested. Lakatos suggested that pioneers of particular research programs anticipate future refutations of some hypotheses derived from the initial model. Although incapable of refining the model at that moment, the researcher speculates on the types of emendations and changes that will prepare the research program to handle likely refutations and anomalies.

Recognizing that the theory of the power transition would evolve over time, Organski acknowledged that his book, *World Politics*,

contains few "laws" but a great many generalizations and hypotheses which are the first step in the formation of theory. Some of the generalizations are crude and need refinement. Some of the hypotheses are probably downright wrong. The reader is invited to refine and correct wherever he can, for only by such steps does knowledge grow. Beginnings must be big and breezy; refinements follow later.<sup>21</sup>

Organski cautioned that power transition theory is not timeless but instead is limited to the period since the Industrial Revolution, stating that, "differential industrialization is the key to understanding the shifts in power in the 19th and 20th centuries, but it was not the key in the years before 1750 or so, and it will not always be the key in the future." Once all states are fully industrialized, he wrote, we will "require new theories."<sup>22</sup>

Organski also provided a detailed discussion of the measurement of national power, which, he argued, comprises six components (ranked in decreasing order of importance): population size, efficacy of political structure, economic development, national morale, resources, and geography. For measurement purposes, Organski collapsed the last two together with population size and economic development, arguing that highly developed and heavily populated states tend to enjoy adequate access to resources and favorable geographic circumstances. He also omitted national morale, which is “virtually impossible to measure objectively,” and suggested national income (effectively, gross national product [GNP]) as a quantifiable indicator summarizing population size and economic development.<sup>23</sup>

State political capacity is a key component of national power that was articulated in the formative statement of the power transition research program as part of the positive heuristic. Organski conceded that a good measure of the effectiveness of political institutions had yet to be developed, and argued that creation of such measures would be “one of the major tasks that remains for political scientists to accomplish in the years ahead.”<sup>24</sup>

The other key variable in power transition theory, but one that until recently has received less attention than national power, is the degree of satisfaction with the international order or existing status quo. Organski argued that “peaceful adjustment is possible in the case of the challenger who is willing to continue the existing international order and abide by its rules, but is much more difficult, if not impossible, in the case of a challenger who wishes to destroy the existing order.”<sup>25</sup> Organski never fully developed the concept or a measure the degree of satisfaction with the status quo, but clearly the conceptualization and operationalization of this variable is a key element in the positive heuristic of the power transition research program.

Finally, Organski identified other factors affecting the likelihood that a power transition will result in war. First, the challenger’s power potential when beginning its ascent: if a rising state is too small to ever challenge the dominant state or “so large that its dominance, once it becomes industrial, is virtually guaranteed,” war becomes very unlikely.<sup>26</sup> The second factor is the speed of the challenger’s rise. The more rapid the challenger’s ascent, the greater the probability of war, for several reasons. The leaders of the dominant state have trouble adjusting to rapid changes; the challenger’s leaders have trouble adapting to a new role in the international order; and a rapid rise “may go to the challenger’s head,” leaving leaders impatient with the unresponsiveness of the international order to the changing distribution of power.<sup>27</sup> Political leaders, to promote extraordinarily rapid growth, may make excessive demands on the populace, which can lead to internal strain and possibly incentives for the diversionary use of force.<sup>28</sup>

The third factor is the dominant state’s flexibility in adjusting to changes in the distribution of power. Especially in conjunction with the rise of a challenger so large as to be assured of dominance in the long run, the ability of the now-dominant state to accommodate the rising challenger through moderate concessions can mitigate the likelihood of war. This is related to the fourth factor, the degree of amity between the dominant power and the challenger. The absence of hostility between the dominant state and the challenger, which may be a function of the similarity of economic or domestic political systems,<sup>29</sup> may reduce the probability of war associated with transitions.<sup>30</sup>

This gives us a characterization of power transition’s positive heuristic (PH):

(PH-1): Construct models explaining major war onset during the industrializing era using the interaction of power transitions and dissatisfaction with the status quo.

(PH-2): Construct quantitative indicators of national power that reflect the intrastate sources of interstate dynamics.

(PH-3): Develop a conceptual and operational definition of political capacity.

(PH-4): Develop a conceptual and operational definition of dissatisfaction with the status quo.

(PH-5): Where the combination of relative power and (dis)satisfaction with the status quo fails to explain the violent or peaceful character of power transitions, incorporate mitigating factors such as the challenger's potential, the speed of the challenger's rise, the dominant power's flexibility, and friendly relations between the dominant power and the challenger . . .<sup>31</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Thus Lakatosian metatheory provides a justification for Friedman's famous "as if" assumption. Milton Friedman, "The Methodology of Positive Economics," in Milton Friedman, ed., *Essays in Positive Economics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 3–43.
- 2 Organski uses the term "nations," but plainly he was referring to states. [A.F.K.] Organski, *World Politics* [(New York: Knopf, 1958)], p. 287. Note that Organski's critique of the *assumptions* of balance of power theory is inappropriate from the perspective of Lakatosian metatheory, which directs us toward the protective belt. Note too that Waltz makes this critique of Organski, although in non-Lakatosian language. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979), p. 119.
- 3 Organski, *World Politics*, pp. 287–90, 306–309, 337–38; [A.F.K.] Organski and [Jacek] Kugler, *The War Ledger* [(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980)], pp. 24–27; [Jacek] Kugler and [A.F.K.] Organski, "The Power Transition: A Retrospective and Prospective Evaluation," in Manus I. Midlarsky, ed., *Handbook of War Studies* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 173; [Douglas] Lemke and [Jacek] Kugler, "The Evolution of the Power Transition Perspective," [in Jacek Kugler and Douglas Lemke, eds., *Parity and War: Evaluations and Extensions of "The War Ledger"* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996)], pp. 5–10.
- 4 Organski, *World Politics*, chap. 11.
- 5 Organski, *World Politics*, pp. 313–316. Organski implies that the satisfaction of both the dominant state and some other great powers with the status quo may add to the inflexibility of their alliance ties, which reinforce their mutual interests and power.
- 6 Organski and Kugler, *The War Ledger*, chap. 1; Kugler and Organski, "The Power Transition," pp. 172–175; [Ronald Tammen, Jacek Kugler, Douglas Lemke, Alan Stam III, Mark Abdollahian, Carole Alsharabati, Brian Buford-Efird, and A.F.K. Organski, *Power Transitions* (Chatham, N.J.: Chatham House, 2000)].
- 7 One could imagine the extension of power transition theory to the relations among communal groups within or across state boundaries. In fact, analyses of ethnic conflict that emphasize the impact on the likelihood of conflict or cooperation of changes in the relative power of communal groups, whether driven by demographic change or by other variables, have some striking parallels with power transition theory. See James Fearon, "Commitment Problems and the Spread of Ethnic Conflict," in David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild, eds., *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 107–126. The extension of realist theory from states to other actors has an important precedent in the application of the concept of the security dilemma between states to the relations among ethnic groups. Barry R. Posen, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict," in Michael E. Brown, ed., *Ethnic Conflict and International Security* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 103–124. Whether such extensions of realist theory in general or power transition theory in particular would constitute intra-program shifts or inter-program shifts raises some difficult issues.

- 8 The rationality assumption is clear in Organski and Kugler, *The War Ledger*, pp. 39–40; and Kugler and Organski, “The Power Transition,” pp. 172–173; and particularly explicit in Tammen et al., *Power Transitions*.
- 9 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; Robert O. Keohane, “Theory of World Politics: Structural Realism and Beyond,” in Ada W. Finifter, ed., *Political Science: The State of the Discipline* (Washington, D.C.: American Political Science Association, 1983), pp. 503–540; Helen Milner, “The Assumption of Anarchy in International Relations Theory: A Critique,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (January 1991), pp. 67–85; Barry Buzan, Charles Jones, and Richard Little, *The Logic of Anarchy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
- 10 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; Lemke and Kugler, “The Evolution of the Power Transition Perspective,” p. 21.
- 11 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 91; Robert Jervis, *System Effects* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 132.
- 12 Organski, *World Politics*, p. 326; Kugler and Lemke, “The Power Transition Research Program.”
- 13 [Jack S. Levy, “Balances and Balancing: Concepts, Propositions, and Research Design,” in John A Vasquez and Colin Elman, eds., *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2003)].
- 14 Organski, *World Politics*, pp. 53–57.
- 15 Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (New York: Knopf, 1948); and John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).
- 16 The dominant power often makes a deliberate effort to coopt some potential challengers and win their acceptance of the existing order, often through the construction of institutions that both reinforce the existing order and impose some limits on the leading state. See G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).
- 17 Kugler and Organski, “The Power Transition,” p. 172; Lemke and Kugler, “The Evolution of the Power Transition Perspective,” p. 8. Gilpin asserts that interstate relationships are ordered within an anarchic international system, and that while domestic and international politics are dissimilar, they share commonalities in their control mechanisms. [Robert] Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* [(Cambridge, UK.: Cambridge University Press, 1981)], p. 28.
- 18 The assumption that international and domestic politics are fundamentally different goes back to Rousseau, which leads Walker to treat Rousseau as the first modern realist. Thomas C. Walker, “Peace, Rivalry, and War” (Ph.D. dissertation, Rutgers University, 2000).
- 19 Similarly, Keohane argues that Gilpin’s hegemonic transition theory represents a break from the hard core of classical realism. Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*; Keohane, “Theory of World Politics: Structural Realism and Beyond,” pp. 517–520.
- 20 This suggests that the negative heuristic is redundant because it follows directly from the hard core and provides no additional information.
- 21 Organski, *World Politics*, p. 6.
- 22 Organski, *World Politics*, p. 307. Organski also suggested that all theories are bound by culture and experience, and that theories appropriate to one context are not always applicable to another context. Accordingly, theories require revision, and “one of the most serious criticisms that can be made of the balance of power theory is that it has not been so revised.” *Ibid.*, p. 307.
- 23 *Ibid.*, chap. 8, esp. pp. 203–210; Organski and Kugler, *The War Ledger*, pp. 33–38.
- 24 Organski, *World Politics*, p. 203. For an initial effort to measure political capacity, see Organski and Kugler, *The War Ledger*, chap. 2.
- 25 *Ibid.*, pp. 325–337.
- 26 *Ibid.*, pp. 334–337.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 335. This explanation of the effects of a rapid rise of the challenger incorporates certain non-rational psychological processes (see also [Charles F.] Doran and [Wes] Parsons, “War and the Cycle of Relative Power” [*American Political Science Review*, Vol. 74, No. 4 (December 1980), pp. 947–965]), and as such it is not fully consistent with the rationalist assumption of the hard core of the research program. Subsequent power transition researchers have incorporated this variable into a rationalist model. Mark A. Abdollahian, “In Search of Structure: The Nonlinear Dynamics of International Politics” (Ph.D. dissertation, Claremont Graduate School, 1996). In any case, propositions about the speed of the challenger’s rise have not been central to the research program.

- 28 In contrast to Organski's argument, Kim and Morrow argue that it is equally plausible that the challenger's leaders will be pessimistic about the ability to sustain extraordinarily rapid growth and will underestimate, not overestimate, their state's eventual position in the international order. Woosang Kim and James D. Morrow, "When Do Power Shifts Lead to War?" *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 36, No.4 (November 1992), pp. 896–922.
- 29 Organski implied but did not explicitly state that similar domestic institutions facilitate interstate "friendship," which partially anticipates the interdemocratic peace proposition. Organski, *World Politics*, pp. 324, 336–337. Others argue that satisfaction with the status quo could have the same result, and in fact Lemke and Reed argue that power transition theory subsumes the interdemocratic peace. Douglas Lemke and William Reed, "Regime Types and Status Quo Evaluations: Power Transition Theory and the Democratic Peace," *International Interactions*, Vol. 22, No.2 (1996), pp. 143–164.
- 30 With the exception of the rapidity of the challenger's rise, Organski explicitly linked these conditions to the peaceful transition between Great Britain and the United States, which he acknowledged as the "one major exception" to the proposed relationship between the rise of a challenger and major war. He discussed a number of possible explanations, but emphasized that "the major reason why England has allowed the United States to take her place without a struggle is because the United States has accepted the Anglo-French international order"—in other words, American satisfaction with the status quo. Organski, *World Politics*, pp. 323–325.
- 31 The concepts of "friendly relations" and especially "flexibility" are quite vague, and unless they are rigorously defined and operationalized independently of the predicted behavior, they open the way for the introduction of an element of non-falsifiability into power transition hypotheses. In practice, however, power transition theorists have carefully avoided this trap.

## Reference

- Lakatos, Imre. "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes." In *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, edited by I. Lakatos and Alan Musgrave, 91–196. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970.

# The nature of international political change

*Robert Gilpin*

From: *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), Chapters 1 & 5.

## A framework for understanding international political change

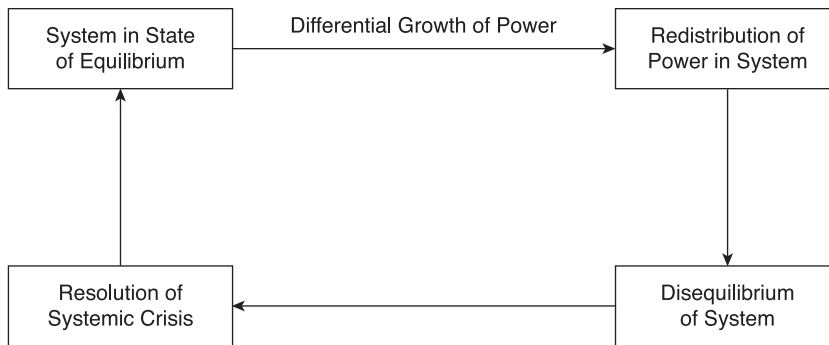
The conceptualization of international political change to be presented in this book rests on a set of assumptions regarding the behavior of states:

- 1 An international system is stable (i.e., in a state of equilibrium) if no state believes it profitable to attempt to change the system.
- 2 A state will attempt to change the international system if the expected benefits exceed the expected costs (i.e., if there is an expected net gain).
- 3 A state will seek to change the international system through territorial, political, and economic expansion until the marginal costs of further change are equal to or greater than the marginal benefits.
- 4 Once an equilibrium between the costs and benefits of further change and expansion is reached, the tendency is for the economic costs of maintaining the status quo to rise faster than the economic capacity to support the status quo.
- 5 If the disequilibrium in the international system is not resolved, then the system will be changed, and a new equilibrium reflecting the redistribution of power will be established.

Obviously these assumptions are abstractions from a highly complex political reality. They do not describe the actual decision processes of statesmen, but as in the case of economic theory, actors are assumed to behave as if they were guided by such a set of cost/benefit calculations. Moreover, these assumptions are not mutually exclusive; they do overlap. Assumptions 2 and 4 are mirror images of one another, assumption 2 referring to a revisionist state and assumption 4 referring to a status quo state . . .

On the basis of these assumptions, the conceptualization of international political change to be presented here seeks to comprehend a continuing historical process. Because history has no starts and stops, one must break into the flow of history at a particular point. The following analysis of political change begins with an international system in a state of equilibrium as shown in Figure 1. An international system is in a state of equilibrium if the more powerful states in the system are satisfied with the existing territorial, political, and economic arrangements. Although minor changes and adjustments may take place, an equilibrium condition is one in which no powerful state (or group) believes that a change in the system would yield additional benefits commensurate with the anticipated costs of bringing about a change in the system (Curry and Wade, 1968, p. 49; Davis and North, 1971, p. 40). Although every state and group in the system could benefit from particular types of change, the costs involved will discourage attempts to seek a change in system. As





*Figure 1* Diagram of international political change

one writer has put it, “a power equilibrium represents a stable political configuration provided there are no changes in returns to conquest” (Rader, 1971, p. 50). Under these conditions, where no one has an incentive to change the system, the status quo may be said to be stable . . .

In every international system there are continual occurrences of political, economic, and technological changes that promise gains or threaten losses for one or another actor. In most cases these potential gains and losses are minor, and only incremental adjustments are necessary in order to take account of them. Such changes take place within the existing international system, producing a condition of homeostatic equilibrium. The relative stability of the system is, in fact, largely determined by its capacity to adjust to the demands of actors affected by changing political and environmental conditions. In every system, therefore, a process of disequilibrium and adjustment is constantly taking place. In the absence of large potential net benefits from change, the system continues to remain in a state of equilibrium.

If the interests and relative powers of the principal states in an international system remained constant over time, or if power relations changed in such a way as to maintain the same relative distribution of power, the system would continue indefinitely in a state of equilibrium. However, both domestic and international developments undermine the stability of the status quo. For example, shifts in domestic coalitions may necessitate redefinition of the “national interest.” However, the most destabilizing factor is the tendency in an international system for the powers of member states to change at different rates because of political, economic, and technological developments. In time, the differential growth in power of the various states in the system causes a fundamental redistribution of power in the system . . .

As a consequence of the changing interests of individual states, and especially because of the differential growth in power among states, the international system moves from a condition of equilibrium to one of disequilibrium. Disequilibrium is a situation in which economic, political, and technological developments have increased considerably the potential benefits or decreased the potential costs to one or more states of seeking to change the international system. Forestalling one’s losses or increasing one’s gains becomes an incentive for one or more states to attempt to change the system. Thus there develops a disjuncture between the existing international system and the potential gains to particular states from a change in the international system.

The elements of this systemic disequilibrium are twofold. First, military, technological, or other changes have increased the benefits of territorial conquest or the benefits of changing the international system in other ways. Second, the differential growth in power among the states in the system has altered the cost of changing the system. This transformation of the benefits and/or the costs of changing the system produces an incongruity or disjuncture among the components of the system. . . . On the one hand, the hierarchy of prestige, the division of territory, the international division of labor, and the rules of the system remain basically unchanged; they continue to reflect primarily the interests of the existing dominant powers and the relative power distribution that prevailed at the time of the last systemic change. On the other hand, the international distribution of power has undergone a radical transformation that has weakened the foundations of the existing system. It is this disjuncture between the several components of the system and its implications for relative gains and losses among the various states in the system that cause international political change.

This disjuncture within the existing international system involving the potential benefits and losses to particular powerful actors from a change in the system leads to a crisis in the international system. Although resolution of a crisis through peaceful adjustment of the systemic disequilibrium is possible, the principal mechanism of change throughout history has been war, or what we shall call hegemonic war (i.e., a war that determines which state or states will be dominant and will govern the system). The peace settlement following such a hegemonic struggle reorders the political, territorial, and other bases of the system. Thus the cycle of change is completed in that hegemonic war and the peace settlement create a new status quo and equilibrium reflecting the redistribution of power in the system and the other components of the system . . .

# Hegemonic war and international change

*Robert Gilpin*

. . . As its relative power increases, a rising state attempts to change the rules governing the international system, the division of the spheres of influence, and, most important of all, the international distribution of territory. In response, the dominant power counters this challenge through changes in its policies that attempt to restore equilibrium in the system. The historical record reveals that if it fails in this attempt, the disequilibrium will be resolved by war . . . An imperial, hegemonic, or great power has essentially two courses of action open to it as it attempts to restore equilibrium in the system. The first and preferred solution is that the challenged power can seek to increase the resources devoted to maintaining its commitments and position in the international system. The second is that it can attempt to reduce its existing commitments (and associated costs) in a way that does not ultimately jeopardize its international position . . .

Historically, the most frequently employed devices to generate new resources to meet the increasing costs of dominance and to forestall decline have been to increase domestic taxation and to exact tribute from other states. Both of these courses of action have inherent dangers in that they can provoke resistance and rebellion. The French Revolution was triggered in part by the effort of the monarchy to levy the higher taxes required to meet the British challenge (von Ranke, 1950, p. 211). Athens's "allies" revolted against Athenian demands for increased tribute. Because higher taxes (or tribute) mean decreased productive investment and a lowered standard of living, in most instances such expedients can be employed for only relatively short periods of time, such as during a war.

The powerful resistance within a society to higher taxes or tribute encourages the government to employ more indirect methods of generating additional resources to meet a fiscal crisis. Most frequently, a government will resort to inflationary policies or seek to manipulate the terms of trade with other countries. As Carlo Cipolla observed (1970, p. 13), the invariable symptoms of a society's decline are excessive taxation, inflation, and balance-of-payments difficulties as government and society spend beyond their means. But these indirect devices also bring hardship and encounter strong resistance over the long run.

The most satisfactory solution to the problem of increasing costs is increased efficiency in the use of existing resources . . .

This innovative solution involves rejuvenation of the society's military, economic, and political institutions. In the case of declining Rome, for example, a recasting of its increasingly inefficient system of agricultural production and a revised system of taxation were required. Unfortunately, social reform and institutional rejuvenation become increasingly difficult as a society ages, because this implies more general changes in customs, attitudes, motivation, and sets of values that constitute a cultural heritage (Cipolla, 1970, p. 11). Vested interests

resist the loss of their privileges. Institutional rigidities frustrate abandonment of "tried and true" methods (Downs, 1967, pp. 158–66) . . .

A declining society experiences a vicious cycle of decay and immobility, much as a rising society enjoys a virtuous cycle of growth and expansion . . . Once caught up in this cycle, it is difficult for the society to break out (Cipolla, 1970, p. 11). For this reason, a more rational and more efficient use of existing resources to meet increasing military and productive needs is seldom achieved . . .

The second type of response to declining fortunes is to bring costs and resources into balance by reducing costs. This can be attempted in three general ways. The first is to eliminate the reason for the increasing costs (i.e., to weaken or destroy the rising challenger). The second is to expand to a more secure and less costly defensive perimeter. The third is to reduce international commitments. Each of these alternative strategies has its attractions and its dangers.

The first and most attractive response to a society's decline is to eliminate the source of the problem. By launching a preventive war the declining power destroys or weakens the rising challenger while the military advantage is still with the declining power. Thus, as Thucydides explained, the Spartans initiated the Peloponnesian War in an attempt to crush the rising Athenian challenger while Sparta still had the power to do so. When the choice ahead has appeared to be to decline or to fight, statesmen have most generally fought. However, besides causing unnecessary loss of life, the greatest danger inherent in preventive war is that it sets in motion a course of events over which statesmen soon lose control (see the subsequent discussion of hegemonic war).

Second, a state may seek to reduce the costs of maintaining its position by means of further expansion.<sup>1</sup> In effect, the state hopes to reduce its long-term costs by acquiring less costly defensive positions. As Edward Luttwak (1976) demonstrated in his brilliant study of Roman grand strategy, Roman expansion in its later phases was an attempt to find more secure and less costly defensive positions and to eliminate potential challengers. Although this response to declining fortunes can be effective, it can also lead to further overextension of commitments, to increasing costs, and thereby to acceleration of the decline . . .

The third means of bringing costs and resources into balance is, of course, to reduce foreign-policy commitments. Through political, territorial, or economic retrenchment, a society can reduce the costs of maintaining its international position. However, this strategy is politically difficult, and carrying it out is a delicate matter. Its success is highly uncertain and strongly dependent on timing and circumstances . . .

Thus far we have described two alternative sets of strategies that a great power may pursue in order to arrest its decline: to increase resources or to decrease costs. Each of these policies has succeeded to some degree at one time or another. Most frequently, however, the dominant state is unable to generate sufficient additional resources to defend its vital commitments; alternatively, it may be unable to reduce its cost and commitments to some manageable size. In these situations, the disequilibrium in the system becomes increasingly acute as the declining power tries to maintain its position and the rising power attempts to transform the system in ways that will advance its interests. As a consequence of this persisting disequilibrium, the international system is beset by tensions, uncertainties, and crises. However, such a stalemate in the system seldom persists for a long period of time.

Throughout history the primary means of resolving the disequilibrium between the structure of the international system and the redistribution of power has been war, more particularly, what we shall call a hegemonic war. In the words of Raymond Aron, describing World War I, a hegemonic war "is characterized less by its immediate causes or its explicit

purposes than by its extent and the stakes involved. It affected all the political units inside one system of relations between sovereign states. Let us call it, for want of a better term, a war of hegemony,<sup>2</sup> hegemony being, if not conscious motive, at any rate the inevitable consequence of the victory of at least one of the states or groups" (Aron, 1964, p. 359). Thus, a hegemonic war is the ultimate test of change in the relative standings of the powers in the existing system.

Every international system that the world has known has been a consequence of the territorial, economic, and diplomatic realignments that have followed such hegemonic struggles. The most important consequence of a hegemonic war is that it changes the system in accordance with the new international distribution of power; it brings about a reordering of the basic components of the system. Victory and defeat reestablish an unambiguous hierarchy of prestige congruent with the new distribution of power in the system. The war determines who will govern the international system and whose interests will be primarily served by the new international order. The war leads to a redistribution of territory among the states in the system, a new set of rules of the system, a revised international division of labor, etc. As a consequence of these changes, a relatively more stable international order and effective governance of the international system are created based on the new realities of the international distribution of power. In short, hegemonic wars have (unfortunately) been functional and integral parts of the evolution and dynamics of international systems . . .

What, then, are the defining characteristics of a hegemonic war? How does it differ from more limited conflicts among states? In the first place, such a war involves a direct contest between the dominant power or powers in an international system and the rising challenger or challengers. The conflict becomes total and in time is characterized by participation of all the major states and most of the minor states in the system. The tendency, in fact, is for every state in the system to be drawn into one or another of the opposing camps. Inflexible bipolar configurations of power (the Delian League versus the Peloponnesian League, the Triple Alliance versus the Triple Entente) frequently presage the outbreak of hegemonic conflict.

Second, the fundamental issue at stake is the nature and governance of the system. The legitimacy of the system may be said to be challenged. For this reason, hegemonic wars are unlimited conflicts; they are at once political, economic, and ideological in terms of significance and consequences. They become directed at the destruction of the offending social, political, or economic system and are usually followed by religious, political, or social transformation of the defeated society . . .

Third, a hegemonic war is characterized by the unlimited means employed and by the general scope of the warfare. Because all parties are drawn into the war and the stakes involved are high, few limitations, if any, are observed with respect to the means employed; the limitations on violence and treachery tend to be only those necessarily imposed by the state of technology, the available resources, and the fear of retaliation. Similarly, the geographic scope of the war tends to expand to encompass the entire international system; these are "world" wars. Thus, hegemonic wars are characterized by their intensity, scope, and duration . . .

In addition to the preceding criteria that define hegemonic war, three preconditions generally appear to be associated with the outbreak of hegemonic war. In the first place, the intensification of conflicts among states is a consequence of the "closing in" of space and opportunities. With the aging of an international system and the expansion of states, the distance between states decreases, thereby causing them increasingly to come into conflict with one another. The once-empty space around the centers of power in the system is appropriated. The exploitable resources begin to be used up, and opportunities for economic

growth decline. The system begins to encounter limits to the growth and expansion of member states; states increasingly come into conflict with one another. Interstate relations become more and more a zero-sum game in which one state's gain is another's loss . . .

The second condition preceding hegemonic war is temporal and psychological rather than spatial; it is the perception that a fundamental historical change is taking place and the gnawing fear of one or more of the great powers that time is somehow beginning to work against it and that one should settle matters through preemptive war while the advantage is still on one's side. It was anxiety of this nature that Thucydides had in mind when he wrote that the growth of Athenian power inspired fear on the part of the Lacedaemonians and was the unseen cause of the war. The alternatives open to a state whose relative power is being eclipsed are seldom those of waging war versus promoting peace, but rather waging war while the balance is still in that state's favor or waging war later when the tide may have turned against it.<sup>3</sup> Thus the motive for hegemonic war, at least from the perspective of the dominant power, is to minimize one's losses rather than to maximize one's gains. In effect, a precondition for hegemonic war is the realization that the law of uneven growth has begun to operate to one's disadvantage.

The third precondition of hegemonic war is that the course of events begins to escape human control. Thus far, the argument of this study has proceeded as if mankind controlled its own destiny. The propositions presented and explored in an attempt to understand international political change have been phrased in terms of rational cost/benefit calculations. Up to a point, rationality does appear to apply; statesmen do explicitly or implicitly make rational calculations and then attempt to set the course of the ship of state accordingly. But it is equally true that events, especially those associated with the passions of war, can easily escape from human control . . .

Indeed, men seldom determine or even anticipate the consequences of hegemonic war. Although in going to war they desire to increase their gains or minimize their losses, they do not get the war they want or expect; they fail to recognize the pent-up forces they are unleashing or the larger historical significance of the decisions they are taking. They underestimate the eventual scope and intensity of the conflict on which they are embarking and its implications for their civilization. Hegemonic war arises from the structural conditions and disequilibrium of an international system, but its consequences are seldom predicted by statesmen. As Toynbee suggested, the law governing such conflicts would appear to favor rising states on the periphery of an international system rather than the contending states in the system itself. States directly engaged in hegemonic conflict, by weakening themselves, frequently actually eliminate obstacles to conquest by a peripheral power.

The great turning points in world history have been provided by these hegemonic struggles among political rivals; these periodic conflicts have reordered the international system and propelled history in new and uncharted directions. They resolve the question of which state will govern the system, as well as what ideas and values will predominate, thereby determining the ethos of succeeding ages. The outcomes of these wars affect the economic, social, and ideological structures of individual societies as well as the structure of the larger international system . . .

## Notes

- 1 This cause of expansion is frequently explained by the "turbulent-frontier" thesis. A classic example was Britain's steady and incremental conquest of India in order to eliminate threatening political disturbances on the frontier of the empire. Two recent examples are the American invasion of Cambodia during the Vietnam War and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.



- 2 Aron's footnote: "Such wars could also be called wars of equilibrium if they were defined with reference to the side which is on the defensive."
- 3 For the case of World War I, see the work of Hawtrey (1952, p. 81).

## References

- Aron, Raymond. "War and Industrial Society." In *War: Studies from Psychology, Sociology, and Anthropology*, edited by Leon Bramson and George W. Goethals, pp. 351–394. New York: Basic Books, 1964.
- Carr, Edward Hallett. *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*. London: Macmillan, 1951.
- Cipolla, Carlo M. *Guns, Sails and Empires: Technological Innovation and the Early Phases of European Expansion, 1400–1700*. New York: Minerva Press, 1965.
- Curry, R. L., Jr., and Wade, L. L. *A Theory of Political Exchange: Economic Reasoning in Political Analysis*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968.
- Davis, Lance E., and Douglass C. North. *Institutional Change and American Economic Growth*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971.
- Downs, Anthony. *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York: Harper & Row, 1967.
- Hawtrey, Ralph G. *Economic Aspects of Sovereignty*. London: Longmans, Green, 1952.
- Luttwak, Edward. *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire: From the First Century A.D. to the Third*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- Rader, Trout. *The Economics of Feudalism*. New York: Gordon & Breach, 1971.
- von Ranke, Leopold. "Great Powers." In *Leopold Ranke: The Formative Years*, edited by Theodore H. von Laue, pp. 181–218. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950.

# Declining power and the preventive motivation for war

*Jack S. Levy*

From: *World Politics* 40, no. 1 (October 1987): 82–107.

The concept of “preventive war” is widely used in the theoretical and historical literature on international politics. It generally refers to a war fought *now* in order to avoid the risks of war under worsening circumstances *later*. To label a war as preventive is to provide a presumed explanation for its occurrence, but the explanatory power of the concept is diminished considerably by definitional ambiguities and by the failure to specify the antecedent conditions contributing to preventive war. In this study, I focus on the *preventive motivation* as a contributory cause of war . . .

## Definition of the preventive motivation

As Van Evera notes, the concept of preventive war is generally used in the literature to refer to a *type* of war, which is defined by a particular cause—the incentive or motivation for preventive action.<sup>1</sup> This might be useful if we wanted to restrict our attention to this one causal sequence and ignore other causes, for then the linkage between shifting power differentials, the preventive motivation, and the outbreak of war would be neatly summarized by the concept of preventive war. A problem arises, however, if our aim is a more general theoretical and empirical analysis of the causes of war. What we are ultimately trying to explain is the outbreak of *war*, not merely preventive war. Power shifts are neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for war, but one cause among many, the relative importance of which we want to analyze. The confounding of cause and effect in the single concept of preventive war makes it very difficult to analyze cases in which power shifts are not followed by war, in which wars occur in the absence of power shifts, or in which power shifts interact with other variables in complex ways. Each of these is necessary for a controlled analysis of the causes of war. It is precisely because there is no perfect correlation between power shifts and war that it is useful to conceptualize the preventive motivation as an intervening variable between power shifts and the outbreak of war. In addition, power shifts may lead to war through other mechanisms besides the preventive motivation (for example, war may be initiated by the rising challenger rather than the declining leader), and the intensity of the preventive motivation may be affected not only by the nature of the power shift but also by other variables, such as historical antagonisms. An analysis of the effects of power shifts and other variables on the intensity of the preventive motivation (which is a continuous, not dichotomous, variable), and of the conditions under which the preventive motivation leads to war, requires that the antecedent, intervening, and dependent variables be defined and operationalized independently of each other.

Thus, the notion of a preventive war is not very useful for a theoretical and empirical analysis of the causes of war. The key question is not whether a particular war is preventive;

instead, it concerns the relative importance of the preventive motivation with respect to other variables in the processes leading to war and the conditions affecting its intensity. After defining the concept of the preventive motivation and distinguishing it from other concepts with which it is often confused, this analysis will examine the conditions affecting the strength of the preventive motivation.

The preventive motivation for war arises from the perception that one's military power and potential are declining relative to that of a rising adversary, and from the fear of the consequences of that decline.<sup>2</sup> There is an apprehension that this decline will be accompanied by a weakening of one's bargaining position and a corresponding decline in the political, economic, cultural, and other benefits that one receives from the status quo; and further, that one might be faced with a future choice between a dangerous war and the sacrifice of vital national interests. The temptation is to fight a war under relatively favorable circumstances *now* in order to block or retard the further rise of an adversary and to avoid both the worsening of the status quo over time and the risk of war under less favorable circumstances later.<sup>3</sup> The situation is particularly serious because of the tendency for states to give greater weight to losses than to gains. They are more likely to fight to maintain an existing status quo than to change the status quo in their favor. Preventive war is more concerned with minimizing one's losses from future decline than with maximizing one's gains by fighting now.<sup>4</sup>

This definition of the preventive motivation is broader than most that are suggested in the literature. In addition to the perception of a decline in relative power capabilities, one or more of the following assumptions are usually included: the preventer's perception of the inevitability, or at least high probability, of a future war; his expectation of being surpassed in power capabilities by the rising adversary; the preventer's initiation of the war; and his military superiority. Although it is common to define prevention to include the preventer's perception of the high probability of a future war, that is neither necessary nor desirable. Statesmen act on the basis of expected utility rather than probability alone. If they fear what their rising adversary *might* do once he gains superiority, and if they believe that this is their "last chance" to avoid a situation in which the adversary has the potential to do substantial harm, a war launched for these reasons should be considered preventive. The perception of a high probability of war may make a preventive action more likely, but that is a hypothesis to be tested rather than a definitional requirement for the preventive motivation. Similar reasoning leads to a rejection of the definitional requirement that the preventer perceive that he will soon be overtaken by the adversary. The same motivation for prevention would apply, though perhaps with less force, if the declining state expected only to be weakened rather than actually surpassed in strength. Victory might still be expected later, but with less certainty and at higher costs.<sup>5</sup>

It is generally assumed that the preventer initiates the war, but this may not be true if the initiator is defined as the actor who strikes first. Even if the preventer wants a war, he may have diplomatic or domestic political incentives for provoking his adversary into striking first. An attack by the adversary would contribute to his diplomatic isolation and to the mobilization of one's own population behind the war effort (or at least minimize any domestic political costs of the war).<sup>6</sup> It is also generally assumed that the preventer must be the stronger actor, or at least perceive himself as the stronger actor. Yet the logic of prevention would also apply to a weaker state which perceives that its inferiority will increase in the future and that the status quo will deteriorate even further. Though such a state would be likely to lose a preventive war, the probability and costs of defeat in a later war would presumably be even greater, so that the expected utility of fighting now would exceed the

expected utility of delay. Moreover, most of the hypotheses generated later in this study to specify the conditions under which a stronger state in decline is most likely to act preventively are equally applicable to a weaker state in decline; they actually explain why preventive action by a weaker state is so rare historically. My definition of the preventive motivation is thus not formally restricted to the stronger actor, though there are few historical cases in which the preventive motivation was an important factor in a war initiated or provoked by a weaker state in decline.<sup>7</sup>

This analysis has been based on the implicit assumption that the perceived threat derives from a continuing long-term secular decline in a state's relative military power and potential—presumably the result of a comparative decline in economic efficiency and rate of growth. The preventive motivation may also arise in a situation in which the decline in relative power is expected to be more transient in nature, spanning years rather than generations. Such a power shift may result from a military reorganization, an arms build-up, the procurement of armaments from abroad, an advance in military technology, or the formation of a hostile military coalition. Each of these generates intermediate-term changes in relative power and temporary windows of vulnerability. Although the latter may be less serious than a long-term decline (in that states can resort to short-term expedients such as alliances or conciliation to provide for their immediate security), they may also have the opposite effect: preventive military action may be more effective in averting a short-term cyclical downswing than a long-term secular decline. In fact, temporary windows of vulnerability have been the primary source of the preventive motivation in several historical cases, including the Seven Years' War (Frederick's fear that a hostile military coalition would form within a year) and World War I (Germany's fear of Russia's increased strength by 1917 after the latter's military reorganization and the upgrading of her railroad system) . . .

### **The strength of the preventive motive: some hypotheses**

A first approximation of the strength of the preventive motivation for war can be determined by a rational cost-benefit framework based on expected-utility calculations, comparing the advantages and disadvantages of war now with those of delay. It will then be necessary to modify this framework by including misperceptions and domestic and bureaucratic politics in the analysis . . .<sup>8</sup>

### ***The costs and benefits of delay***

The most important factor affecting the strength of the preventive motivation is the preventer's perception of the extent to which military power and potential are shifting in favor of a particular adversary. This decline will have a direct impact on his future bargaining power and the distribution of benefits from the status quo, and an indirect impact on the probability of a future war. The greater the expected advantage of the adversary, the greater his relative bargaining position, the extent of the preventer's likely concessions, and the likely costs of a future war; hence, the greater the incentive for preventive action now in an attempt to impede the rise of the adversary. If the challenger's potential for growth is limited, and particularly if the challenger is unlikely to surpass the leading power, the preventive motivation is much weaker.<sup>9</sup> The stronger power may still have an incentive to maintain its margin of superiority, but in the absence of a more serious future threat, the potential costs of war may be too high.

An alternative hypothesis is suggested by William R. Thompson. He argues that “the probability of conflict is also reduced if the challenger’s potential for growth is so great that its eventual rise to dominance seems inevitable. Both the challenger and the dominant power are more likely to have time to adjust to the likelihood of transition.” This assumes the expectation that war would have no effect on the evolution of relative power capabilities. Statesmen have often convinced themselves that war will reverse or retard the rising military power of the adversary, however, and history provides few examples of states’ nonviolent acceptance of their national decline.<sup>10</sup>

The rate at which the power differential is closing may be even more important than its ultimate magnitude. Whereas the adversary’s ultimate power potential is distant in time and difficult to predict, his rate of growth is readily observable and therefore more threatening. The faster the relative rise of the challenger, the greater the incentive for prevention. A rapid rise increases the expectation of the declining state that it will in fact be overtaken and that it will be overtaken quickly, as well as the tendency to exaggerate these trends. It also reduces the declining state’s time to increase its own power, gain allies, seek an accommodation with its rival, or otherwise adjust to the changing distribution of power.<sup>11</sup>

The strength of the preventive motivation is also an increasing function of the expected probability of a future war with an ever more powerful adversary, which in turn is a function of numerous variables. The greater the ultimate superiority of the rising challenger, the stronger his future bargaining position and his disenchantment with the present status quo, the greater his confidence in a military victory in the event of war, the greater his demands for concessions, and consequently the greater the likelihood of either unacceptable concessions or a future war . . .

### ***The costs and benefits of war now***

The expected costs of delay can be a powerful motivation for prevention, but fighting a war now can also be costly. The critical variables here are the preventer’s expected probability of victory and the associated risks of defeat, and the expected costs of each.<sup>12</sup> The greater the probability of victory and the lower the expected costs of war, the stronger the preventive motivation.<sup>13</sup> Although the degree of military superiority of the preventer is the primary determinant of the expected probability of victory and its costs, other factors may also be important. Expectations regarding the possible intervention of other states, particularly great powers, may be critical. The diplomatic isolation of a strong and rising adversary is especially conducive to an incentive for prevention, as it reduces the costs and risks of defeat for the preventer . . .<sup>14</sup>

One factor that interacts with the dyadic military balance to affect the outcome of the war is the offensive/defensive balance of military technology, defined in terms of the degree of superiority needed by the attacker to overcome a defender. The greater the offensive advantage, the greater the potential advantage for a preventer who chooses to strike first, and hence the stronger the preventive motivation. This is particularly compelling if the offensive advantage is expected to persist into the future period of the adversary’s superiority, for that would increase the seriousness of the future threat. In addition, the actual conduct of a preventive war is facilitated by offensive military doctrines calling for territorial penetration; states facing a decline in relative military capabilities may adopt offensive doctrines for this reason.<sup>15</sup>

***Other variables***

Although the straightforward cost-benefit calculations provide a good approximation of the strength of the preventive motivation for war, they must be modified by other factors that may also have a significant impact. Among the most important are misperceptions, policy makers' orientations toward risk and uncertainty, domestic politics, and the policy preferences and political influence of the military.

The expected probabilities of victory and defeat and their associated costs—and hence, the strength of the preventive motivation for war—are greatly affected by misperceptions. Decision makers often exaggerate their own military strength relative to that of the adversary; they therefore overestimate the probability of victory and underestimate its probable costs. They tend to underestimate the likelihood of third parties' intervening on the side of their adversary and the likelihood of their own potential friends' staying neutral. They also tend to underestimate the military strength and impact of adversaries who intervene, and to overestimate the impact of allies who do so . . .

A decision to initiate a war for preventive purposes involves enormous risks and uncertainties, and the risk propensities of decision makers can have a significant impact.<sup>16</sup> This issue is particularly complex because it consists of two sets of risks and uncertainties: the uncertainties inherent in a war fought now and the uncertainties involved in delay. The first set involves the inability to predict precisely the probability of victory in a preventive war or its likely costs, including the risk of an expansion of the war. The second involves uncertainties regarding whether, and how far, one's power position will continue to decline; the adversary's intentions once he achieves superiority; one's ability to secure diplomatic support or to appease the adversary successfully; and the likely costs of war in the worst case. It is not at all clear which set of risks and uncertainties will dominate. Will a risk-averse actor shy away from taking a preventive action because of the short-term risks? Or is such a war the risk-averse strategy in the face of the expected loss of one's military superiority? . . .

The intensity of the preventive motivation may also be affected by bureaucratic political considerations, particularly the policy preferences of the military and their influence in the policy-making process. Pressures for preventive action are more likely to come from the military than from civilians. By professional training, they are more sensitive to military threats to their country's security, more predisposed to worst-case analysis, more concerned about a long-term decline in military assets, and perhaps more willing to resort to extreme solutions in order to avert any further decline in military strength.<sup>17</sup> Although military pressure alone is rarely a sufficient condition for preventive military action, it may be very nearly a necessary condition. It is unlikely that the preventive motivation could be strong in the face of military opposition; it would be difficult for civilians to overrule a collective military judgment that a preventive war would be too risky . . .

The general attitude toward war in society may also influence the intensity of the preventive motivation. The greater the extent to which war is viewed in Clausewitzian terms as a legitimate instrument of policy for the attainment of a wide range of national political objectives (and not just as a policy of last resort when the territorial and constitutional integrity of the state is most directly and immediately threatened), the fewer the domestic political constraints inhibiting policy makers from resorting to force, and hence the stronger the preventive motivation. This attitude toward war may vary in different types of political systems . . .<sup>18</sup>



## Notes

- 1 Stephen Van Evera ["The Causes of War," Ph.D. diss. (University of California, Berkeley, 1984)], 71.
- 2 Note that the emphasis is on the decline in *relative* strength, consistent with the conception of power in relational and zero-sum terms. See Robert Gilpin, *U.S. Power and the Multinational Corporation* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), chap. 1. A state whose capabilities are increasing in absolute terms may have an incentive for preventive action if its adversary is growing even faster. Note also that the emphasis is on the *perception* of changing power differentials by state decision makers.
- 3 Preventive military action is not, of course, the only possible "solution" to the problem of an impending decline in relative military potential. Future security might also be provided by alliances. Although the conditions under which states resort to alliances rather than to preventive military action is an important research question, my working hypothesis is that great powers are hesitant to rely on others to satisfy their *long-term* security needs. Alliances tend to be transient in nature and excessively affected by domestic politics and personalities; consequently, they are unreliable over the long haul. Moreover, alliances deal with the symptoms rather than with the causes of a future threat, whereas preventive military action sometimes provides the hope of dealing more directly with the source of the threat (though the true sources are often economic).  
 Another alternative to preventive military action, for certain states under certain conditions, would be an attempt to reverse one's decline through internal means, such as a policy of industrial revitalization. Although such efforts are more viable over the long term than the short term, this may be the preferred alternative if the immediate military threat is not too great. At this stage, the preventive motivation for war can best be analyzed by isolating it from alternative policy instruments, but ultimately the role of alliances and of internal change will have to be included in an integrated model. (The possible importance of industrial revitalization has been emphasized to me by David Lake.)
- 4 My assertion that states tend to give greater weight to losses than to gains is consistent with recent findings from experimental psychology. If *A* is preferred to *B*, an individual at *A* would be willing to pay more to avoid dropping to *B* than the same individual at *B* would be willing to pay to move up to *A*. See Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision Under Risk," *Econometrica* 47 (March 1979), 263–91; Kahneman and Tversky, "Choices, Values, and Frames," *American Psychologist* 39 (April 1984), 341–50; Jack L. Knetsch and John A. Sinden, "Willingness to Pay and Compensation Demanded: Experimental Evidence of an Unexpected Disparity in Measures of Value," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 99 (August 1984), 507–21. This phenomenon is related to the concept of framing and to risk orientation, which are discussed later. [Given a choice between a certain gain *x* and a lottery involving an expected value  $y > x$  (in typical experiments *x* and *y* differ by 20–30%), individuals generally choose *x*; but given a choice between a certain loss *x* and a lottery involving an expected value  $y < x$ , they choose to gamble and choose *y*. These findings are robust and contrary to the assumptions of expected utility theory. They are generally explained by the tendency to give disproportionately high weight to nearly certain outcomes (the "certainty effect"), by the asymmetry of losses and gains and the steeper slope of loss curves, and by the tendency to frame the choice in terms of the status quo rather than of an absolute or arbitrary standard. . . . Also see John C. Hershey and Paul Schoemaker, "Risk Taking and Problem Context in the Domain of Losses; An Expected Utility Analysis," *Journal of Risk and Insurance* 47 (March 1980), 111–32; Robert Jervis, "War and Misperception," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18 (Spring 1988).]
- 5 For other definitions of "preventive war," see Alfred Vagts, *Defense and Diplomacy* (New York: King's Crown, 1956), 263; Julian Lider, *On the Nature of War* (Farnborough, England: Saxon House, 1977), 63; Richard Ned Lebow ["Windows of Opportunity: Do States Jump Through Them?" *International Security* 9 (Summer 1984)], 154; Van Evera ["The Causes of War," Ph.D. diss. (University of California, Berkeley, 1984)], 60–61; Organski [*World Politics*, 2d ed. (New York: Knopf, 1968)], 371; Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 25; Robert Gilpin [*War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981)], 191; Fritz Fischer [*War of Illusions* (New York: Norton, 1975)], 468. Fischer's definition, which requires not just the perception of inevitability but also the actual intention by the target state to launch a war against the preventer within a few years, is very restrictive. It is also self-serving, for it facilitates his thesis of German war guilt and the argument that the German decision for war

was not a preventive action deriving from perceived military necessity, but instead an unprovoked war of aggression. Because the concept of the preventive motivation refers to the motivation of the preventer, it is proper to focus on his perceptions alone, without including the intentions of the target.

- 6 For example, German Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg insisted to the military that they must allow Russia to mobilize first. He was concerned about the reaction not only of England, but also of the Social Democrats in Germany who, he believed, would approve war credits only for a defensive war against Russia. Similarly, German Admiral von Müller argued that Germany should "present Russia or France or both with an ultimatum which would unleash the war with right on our side." Moltke later agreed that "the attack must come from the Slavs." See Fritz Fischer [*War of Illusions* (New York: Norton, 1975)], 162; [*Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: Norton, 1961)], 33; Fischer, *World Power or Decline?* (New York: Norton, 1974), 30. See also Alfred Vagts [*Defense and Diplomacy* (New York: King's Crown, 1956)], 290–91.
- 7 The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor may be one example. It should be emphasized that preventive military action can be taken by *any* state in decline relative to a particular adversary, though it may be more common for the leading state in an international system or at least in a regional subsystem.
- 8 Recall that the preventive motivation is only one of several possible responses to declining military power and potential. A complete analysis would have to evaluate the relative costs and benefits of alternative policy options, particularly alliances. See fn. [3]; also, Benjamin A. Most and Harvey Starr, "International Relations Theory, Foreign Policy Substitutability, and 'Nice' Laws," *World Politics* 36 (April 1984), 383–406.
- 9 In cases where the preventer is not fearful of being overtaken in the near future, certain critical thresholds of adversary strength may still be important (for example, Israel's concern in 1982 about Iraq's acquisition of a nuclear capability).
- 10 Thompson, "Succession Crises in the Global Political System: A Test of the Transition Model," in Albert L. Bergesen, ed., *Crises in the World System* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1983), chap. 5, 93–116, at 96; also, A.F.K. Organski [*World Politics*, 2d ed. (New York: Knopf, 1968)], 376.
- 11 Organski [*World Politics*, 2d ed. (New York: Knopf, 1968)] and Thompson [Succession Crises in the Global Political System: A Test of the Transition Model," in Albert L. Bergesen, ed., *Crises in the World System* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1983)] suggest that a rapid rise may increase the challenger's incentives for war, but this is less significant than the effect of a narrowing power differential on the stronger state.
- 12 In actuality, of course, victory and defeat constitute two ends of a continuous range of possible outcomes, each associated with an expected probability of occurrence and net cost or benefit. Note that the positive benefits from a victorious war may be a powerful incentive for war, but this would exist independently of declining power, and hence independently of the preventive motivation.
- 13 This hypothesis explains why weaker states rarely succumb to the preventive motivation. If we control for the fear of the future or degree of anticipated decline, this hypothesis is valid for only a restricted range of probabilities. If the expected probability of victory is too large, reflecting an enormous military advantage for the preventer over a weak but growing opponent, there is no immediate threat to one's position and fewer incentives for preventive action.
- 14 On the importance of expectations of intervention by third states, see Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (New York: Free Press, 1973), chap. 4; Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, *The War Trap* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).
- 15 On the concept of the offensive/defensive balance, see Jack S. Levy, "The Offensive/Defensive Balance of Military Technology and the Incidence of War: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis," *International Studies Quarterly* 28 (June 1984), 219–38; Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30 (January 1978), 167–214. On the link between offensive doctrines and preventive war, see Stephen Van Evera ["The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of World War I," *International Security* 9 (Summer 1984)], 64, and ["The Causes of War," Ph.D. diss. (University of California, Berkeley, 1984)], 74–76; Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 69–70. The importance of this factor for preventive war should not be exaggerated, however, for the marginal impact of the offensive/defensive balance of military technology is greatest when the difference in military capabilities is small, but the preventive motivation is weakest under those conditions.
- 16 Risk refers to a situation in which the probabilities of different outcomes are known, whereas in a situation of uncertainty the probabilities of various outcomes are not known. Because of the

inherent unpredictability of international behavior, uncertainty is more important than risk. I shall use risk orientation loosely to refer to attitudes toward uncertainty as well as risk. Technically, the analysis of the expected utility of preventive war and delay is inseparable from an analysis of orientation toward risk.

- 17 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (New York: Vintage, 1957), chap. 3; Richard K. Betts, *Soldiers, Statesmen and Cold War Crises* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977); Posen, [*The Sources of Military Doctrine* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984)], chap. 2; Vagts [*Defense and Diplomacy* (New York: King's Crown, 1956)], 263.
- 18 This variable is potentially important but conceptually difficult, and is generally neglected. See Richard Ned Lebow [*Between Peace and War* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981)], 247–54. Although the question whether democratic states are less war-prone than nondemocratic states has yet to be answered conclusively (though democracies almost never fight other democracies), it is not unreasonable to hypothesize that the *preventive* motivation for war is less intense in democratic states. See Steve Chan, “Mirror, Mirror on the Wall . . . : Are the Freer Countries More Pacific?” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 28 (December 1984), 617–48.

# Neorealism and the myth of bipolar stability

## Toward a new dynamic realist theory of major war

*Dale C. Copeland*

From: *Security Studies* 5, no. 3 (Spring 1996): 29–89.

Since the introduction of Kenneth Waltz's neorealist theory in 1979,<sup>1</sup> it has been widely accepted that bipolar systems are more stable than multipolar ones, that they are less likely to fall into major war.<sup>2</sup> This conclusion has rested on the prominent example of a single case, the cold war era from 1945 to 1991. Indeed, the lack of major war during this period has inspired John Lewis Gaddis to call it the "long peace." John Mearsheimer goes further, warning that we will soon "miss the cold war" as emerging multipolarity brings in its train a much greater likelihood of major war, at least in a multipolar Europe which is Mearsheimer's focus.<sup>3</sup> Scholars arguing against this neorealist perspective on the new world order (or disorder) tend not to dispute the view that multipolarity is inherently unstable, but instead point to other factors, such as the growth of global democracy and the end of hyper-nationalism, that should help mitigate the pernicious effects of a multipolar system.<sup>4</sup>

This article challenges this emerging consensus on the stability of bipolarity and the instability of multipolarity. In its logic, the argument for bipolar stability is flawed even in the static world assumed by neorealists. As the article demonstrates, however, as soon as dynamic changes in the differentials of power between states are incorporated, bipolarity is manifestly less stable than multipolarity. In terms of empirical evidence, sole reliance on the post-1945 case should make us wary of the neorealist hypothesis. In the three other clear examples of bipolarity prior to the cold war era—Sparta versus Athens in the ancient Greek system, Carthage versus Rome in the third century B.C., and France versus the Hapsburgs in the early sixteenth century—each experienced long and devastating major wars.

Moreover, until Mutually Assured Destruction in the mid-1960s made war between the superpowers truly irrational, the world did get frighteningly close to major war, most notably in October 1962 over Soviet missiles in Cuba. To argue that the period from 1945 to 1963 was stable simply because no war occurred is like arguing that a man who walked an icy tightrope between two skyscrapers was in a stable situation simply because he made it across. The early cold war was a long peace only in retrospect. It would be hard to find a diplomatic historian who does not think that the probability of major war rose significantly during such events as the 1961 Berlin Crisis and particularly the Cuban Missile Crisis. Leaders of the time had no illusions of stability: President Kennedy himself is said to have estimated the likelihood of nuclear war during the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis as between one-third and a half . . .<sup>5</sup>

In this article, I argue that the early cold war period was quite unstable even with the presence of nuclear weapons, the clearest demonstration being the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Any stability that existed was in spite of bipolarity, not because of it. To demonstrate the inherent instability of bipolarity, I offer a new dynamic realist theory—what I call dynamic differentials theory—to help explain the marked fluctuations in the likelihood of major war that occur within a system over time. The theory begins by arguing that great power behavior will be driven by the simultaneous impact of the differentials in relative military power between states and the trends of those differentials over time. In any system, the conflicts leading to major war will most likely be initiated by the dominant military power, and only when it sees itself to be inevitably and deeply declining. The dominant state's assessment of the inevitability and depth of decline, in turn, depends on the levels and trends of two other forms of power, economic and "potential" power. The greater the deficits and negative trends in these latter types of power, the greater the probability of major war.

The effects of decline, however, vary greatly depending on the polarity of the system. In multipolarity, the declining state must have significant military superiority to consider taking on the system; when the great powers are roughly the same size, the mere presence of many great powers serves to deter all-out aggression, even before considering the impact of alliances. In bipolarity, on the other hand, the declining state may initiate conflict even if it is only essentially equal to the other great power (indeed, even the second-ranked superpower may instigate conflict). Since major war can occur in multipolarity only when states are markedly unequal, while in bipolarity such war can occur when states are *either* equal *or* unequal, bipolarity is an inherently less stable system for any given set of power levels and trends.

The theory seeks to explain changes in a continuous dependent variable, the probability of major war, and this marks an important conceptual departure from neorealism. Much of the difficulty with neorealism's analysis stems from its use of a dichotomous dependent variable, war/no-war, such that whenever no-war is observed, the system is assumed to be stable.<sup>6</sup> As noted, this leads to the unsustainable conclusion that because events like the Cuban Missile Crisis did not result in major war, bipolarity is stable. For dynamic differentials theory, it is precisely the changes in the intensity of great power relationships across time—the shifts from relative calm to the acute crises which lead the system to the brink of major war or over the brink—that are of interest . . .<sup>7</sup>

### Dynamic differentials theory

In this section, I outline a new systemic realist theory, dynamic differentials theory, to help overcome the theoretical and empirical difficulties of current realist approaches.<sup>8</sup> The theory represents a fusion of some of the best elements of these approaches. From classical realism, it borrows the notion of the differentials of power between states. From structural neorealism, it incorporates the importance of polarity. From hegemonic stability theory, the view that the shifts or trends in the power balance are critical to state behavior is included.

The independent variable of the new theory is the differentials of relative military power between great powers and the expected trend of those differentials, distinguishing between the effects of power changes in bipolar versus multipolar systems.<sup>9</sup> In addition, I break the notion of power into three types—military, economic, and potential power—to show how decline in the latter two forms effect the behavior of states that may be superior in military power.

The theory makes three main assertions. First, in any system, assuming states are rational actors seeking primarily their own security, the dominant and declining military great power is most likely to begin a major war. Second, the constraints on the dominant state differ in bipolar and multipolar systems. In multipolarity, major war is only likely if the declining

state has a significant level of military superiority, while in bipolarity the declining state can attack even when only roughly equal. Third, the probability of major war increases when decline is seen as both inevitable and deep. A consideration of overall economic and potential power, as well as military power, is thus necessary, since the level and trends of these two other forms of power determine the inevitability and extent of military decline.

The first proposition is relatively straightforward: because major wars are so costly, and because they risk the very survival of the state, it is far more likely that the initiator of such a war will be the dominant military power in any system; smaller military powers simply lack the power to “take on the system.”<sup>10</sup> Moreover, it is irrational for any great power to begin a major war while still rising, since, as noted in the previous section, waiting allows it to attack later with a higher probability of success, and at less cost.<sup>11</sup>

The second proposition requires a more detailed explication. Stated slightly differently, while equality between individual great powers is likely to be stabilizing in multipolarity even if some states are declining, equality in bipolarity can be very unstable when either of the great powers, but especially the dominant power, is undergoing decline. Thus, the conditions for major war in multipolarity are stricter than those in bipolarity, meaning that for any given set of power differentials and trends, war is less likely in multipolar systems.

The logic behind this assertion goes as follows. In multipolar systems, if all states are relatively equal in military power, it would be foolish for any one state to make a bid for hegemony against the system, for four main reasons.<sup>12</sup> First, even if a state expects the others to remain disunited—that is, even if it does not expect a counter-coalition to form against it—equality with its rivals will likely mean long and costly bilateral wars, wars which will sap the state’s ability to continue the fight until hegemony is achieved. If complete hegemony is not achieved, those states that sit on the sidelines will emerge in a stronger relative position after the war—due to the high costs of bilateral wars between near equal belligerents—and hence launching all-out war in the first place is irrational.<sup>13</sup>

Second, to the extent that a coalition does form against the challenger, there is even less probability of the initiator emerging in a stronger and more secure position after the war. Coalitions in multipolarity, since they are made up of states with “great power,” become formidable fighting forces as their unity increases.<sup>14</sup> The third aspect follows from the other two. A declining but only equal great power in multipolarity has reason to think that a rising state, as long as it does not grow too preponderant in the system, will also be restrained in its ambitions by the presence of so many other great powers; hence, a preventive war for security is less imperative.

Fourth, and finally, to the extent that an equal but declining power can form alliances against the state that is rising, it will have less concern about being overtaken. This restates classical realism’s insight that states in multipolarity, compared to bipolarity, have recourse to an additional means to uphold their security besides internal balancing, namely, external balancing through alliances. Given the collective action problem that may be present, however, my deductive logic for why an equal but declining state does not initiate war in multipolarity does not depend on this state’s ability to form a tight alliance for its security (although such alliances certainly reinforce the argument). Rather, the core argument revolves around the state’s recognition that even if no alliances form against it if it begins a major war, it will not have enough power to win a victory against all the others; and even if no alliances form with this state if it chooses to decline gracefully, the presence of many actors should help deter the rising state from attacking later.

Accordingly, in multipolarity, only if a state is clearly superior to any other individual state in military power can it even contemplate waging a war for hegemony. In bipolar



systems, the above arguments push in the opposite direction, and therefore preventive war is likely even when states are near equals. First, the declining and dominant state realizes that it only has to face one other great power, not many, and therefore even if the war is long and difficult, there are no additional opponents to defeat after the bilateral victory is achieved. In short, in bipolarity a successful bid for hegemony is much easier to achieve. Moreover, even if the declining state fears a stalemated and inconclusive war with the rising state, it does not have to worry about a relative loss to third party actors that sit on the sidelines to avoid the costs of war; such actors, since small, are unlikely to gain enough to raise themselves to the top of the system.

Second, the declining state knows that even if a coalition forms against its attack, the small states joining the rising great power are unlikely to alter significantly the expected outcome. Compared to multipolarity, coalitional partners simply have far less weight to throw against the initiator of major war. Third, because the declining state realizes the above two factors are in *its* favor when it is slightly superior, it knows that the rising state will not be terribly constrained after this state achieves superiority. Fourth, and finally, the declining state knows that the other states in the system, even if they are willing to ally against the ascending state, are not substantial enough truly to shore up its waning security.<sup>15</sup> Hence, preventive war before the point of overtaking makes rational sense.<sup>16</sup>

The above argument is summarized visually in Figures 1 and 2. These diagrams present the possible systemic situations that might be faced in either multipolarity or bipolarity.<sup>17</sup> Note that at times  $t_1$ ,  $t_4$ , and  $t_5$ , the probability of major war should be low for both system-types, since the trends in the military balance are stable; with no state experiencing decline, there is no imperative to go to war for security reasons.<sup>18</sup> At time  $t_2$ , however, the impending decline of the dominant state in the bipolar situation (Figure 2) means the likelihood of major war is high, while in the multipolar situation the likelihood is low due to the restraining presence of the other equal great powers. At times  $t_6$  and  $t_7$ , when there is marked inequality in both bipolar and multipolar systems, impending decline should make major war highly likely in both system-types. At  $t_8$ , however, while the probability of war is again high in the bipolar case, instability in the multipolar case should be tempered somewhat by the existence of the third, fourth, and fifth ranked powers (although since these latter powers are weaker than at time  $t_2$ , the probability of major war is still "moderate").<sup>19</sup> Across the different scenarios, it is thus more likely that bipolar systems will experience major war.

Since in both multipolarity and bipolarity, it is the dominant and declining state that initiates war, when it does so depends greatly on its estimation of the inevitability and the extent of the fall: the higher the expectation of an inevitable and deep decline, the more the state will be inclined to preventive war for purely security reasons. This is where the third aspect of dynamic differentials theory, namely, the distinction between military, economic, and potential power, comes in. Economic power is simply a state's total relative economic activity, while potential power includes all the capital and resources, both physical and human, that could be eventually translated into measurable economic output, but have not yet been done so for whatever reasons.<sup>20</sup> A state's military power is clearly dependent on its base of economic power, while economic power is built on the foundation of potential power. A state in either bipolarity or multipolarity that is superior but declining in military power, but also superior and growing in the other two power dimensions, is unlikely to be that worried about decline. After all, given that its economic and potential power is strong and ascending, this state should be able to reverse the downward military trend simply by spending more on arms into the future.

A state which is superior in military power but *inferior* in economic and especially potential power, however, is more likely to believe that, once it starts to decline in military power, decline will be inevitable and deep. This is especially so if the trends of relative economic and potential power are downward as well. The state will believe that there is little it can do through arms racing to reverse its declining military power: it would be spending a greater percentage of an already declining economic base attempting to keep up with a rising

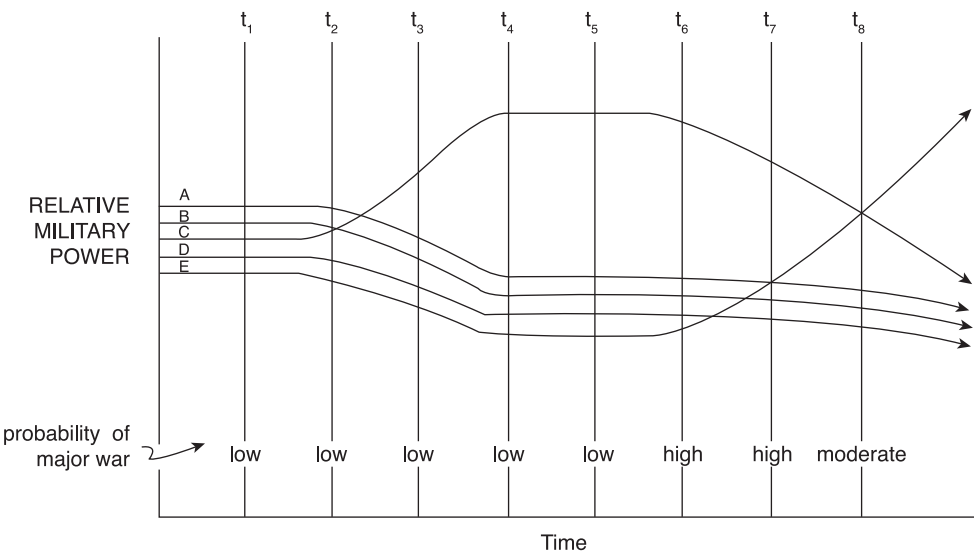


Figure 1 Relative military power curves and the probability of major war: multipolarity

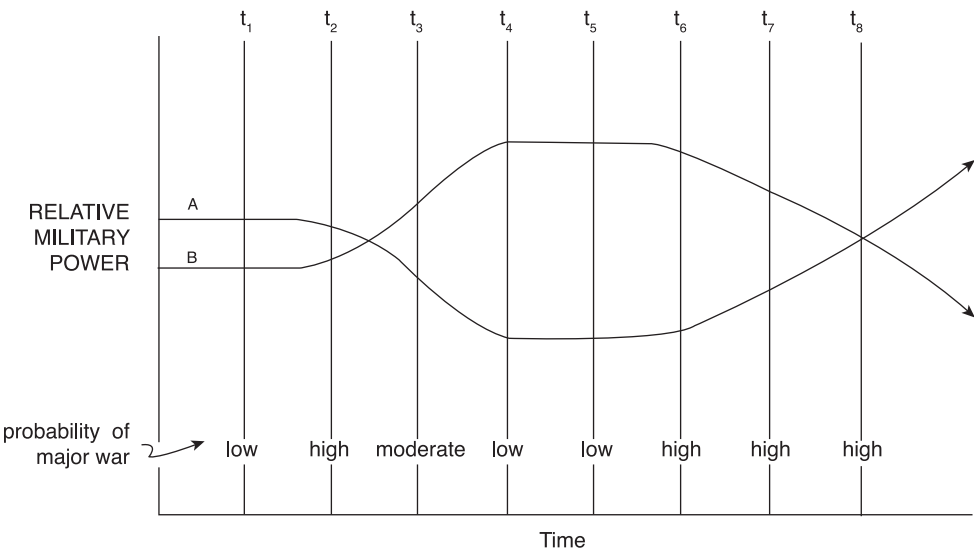


Figure 2 Relative military power curves and the probability of major war: bipolarity

state which has a greater latent ability to grow militarily. Moreover, economic restructuring is unlikely to help since the potential power which is the foundation for economic power is also inferior and declining. Under these circumstances, a dominant military power is likely to be pessimistic about the future, and therefore more inclined to initiate major war as a “now-or-never” attempt to uphold its waning security . . .<sup>21</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979). An earlier version of his argument appeared in his “The Stability of a Bipolar World,” *Daedalus* 93, no. 3 (summer 1964): 881–909.
- 2 Major wars, in their ideal type, are defined as wars that involve all the great powers in any system, are fought at the highest level of intensity (that is, full military mobilization), and where there is a strong possibility that great powers may be eliminated as sovereign states. The final criterion is particularly important, since it means such wars are wars of national survival, potentially altering the system’s very structure (in Waltz’s conception of structure, that is, the number of great powers, *Theory of International Politics*, chap. 5). Such “wars of elimination” can therefore be distinguished from “wars of position,” that is, from wars where great powers struggle over the control of small third parties. Major wars would thus include both World Wars of this century, the Napoleonic wars, the Peloponnesian War, and the like. Synonymous terms used in the literature are systemic, hegemonic, or general wars; see Jack Levy, “Theories of General Wars,” *World Politics* 37, no. 3 (April 1985): 344–74.
- 3 Gaddis, “The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Postwar International System,” *International Security* 10, no. 4 (spring 1986): 99–142; Mearsheimer, “Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War,” *Atlantic* 266, no. 2, August 1990, 35–50. See also Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War,” *International Security* 15, no. 1 (summer 1990): 5–56.
- 4 See, inter alia, Jack Snyder, “Averting Anarchy in the New Europe,” *International Security* 14, no. 4 (spring 1990): 5–42; Robert Jervis, “The Future of World Politics: Will It Resemble the Past?,” *International Security* 16, no. 3 (winter 1991/92): 39–73; Aaron Friedberg, “Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia,” *International Security* 18, no. 3 (winter 1993/94): 5–33; James M. Goldgeier and Michael McFaul, “A Tale of Two Worlds: Core and Periphery in the Post-Cold War Era,” *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (spring 1992): 467–91. Stephen Van Evera (“Primed For Peace: Europe After the Cold War,” *International Security* 15, no. 3 [winter 1990/91]: 7–57) also suggests that other factors override the effects of polarity, but he argues that bipolar and multipolar systems are about equally likely to fall into major war; some of his points against bipolar stability (for which he thanks discussions with Chaim Kaufmann) are incorporated later.
- 5 Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper, 1965), 705; Arthur M. Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (New York: Ballantine, 1978), 570. Michael Brecher and Jonathan Wilkenfeld also suggest that the frequent crises in the cold war undermines the idea of a stable postwar system (“International Crises and Global Instability: The Myth of the ‘Long Peace’,” in *The Long Postwar Peace: Contending Explanations and Projections*, ed. Charles W. Kegley Jr. [New York: HarperCollins, 1991], 85–104). They define “stability” broadly, however, to include the general prospect for change and the number of Third World crises (*ibid.*, 86–90). In this article, I focus solely on stability as the likelihood of major war; wars on the periphery are of interest only insofar as they increase the chance of all-out great power war. Also questioning the cold war as a stable system are Charles W. Kegley and Gregory A. Raymond, “Must We Fear a Post-Cold War Multipolar System?” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 36, no. 3 (September 1992): 573–85, although their definition of stability is again broader than mine (see also their *A Multipolar Peace? Great-Power Politics in the Twenty-first Century* [New York: St. Martin’s, 1994], chap. 2). Moreover, the objective of the above authors is not to show that bipolarity is more unstable than multipolarity—the goal of this article—but rather to suggest that it does not possess greater stability, as neorealists claim.
- 6 It is not that neorealists never refer to the concept of the “probability of major war”; Waltz, for example, uses it to express his views on the effects of nuclear weapons, as just quoted. It is that neorealists do not use the concept as a variable when they construct or test their structural theories.

- 7 The probability of major war at any point in time is a difficult thing to estimate. I estimate changes in this variable by changes in the extent of the states' planning for major war, changing internal estimates of the likelihood of such conflict, and by fluctuations in the general level of hostility between states, shown most clearly by major crises like the Cuban Missile Crisis. As for the latter measure, the fact that leaders are willing to bear the risk of preemption or of reputation-driven escalation when they initiate a major crisis indicates they are consciously accepting an increase in the probability of major war as the price necessary to resolve an unacceptable status quo without war (for example, by the capitulation of the other side). More strongly, the leaders initiating the crisis understand that should the other not make sufficient concessions, major war may have to be chosen as the lesser of two evils (the evil of war over an even less satisfactory status quo). Thus, in the crisis period before the Peloponnesian War, the Spartans might have pulled back from war, but only had the Athenians made concessions to reverse Spartan decline; in the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Americans brought on the formal crisis period to compel the removal of the missiles, and would have attacked Cuba—with all the attendant risks of escalation—had the Soviets not capitulated.
- 8 A full explanation of the theory is found in Dale Copeland, "Realism and the Origins of Major War" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1993), chap. 2.
- 9 Military power is defined as the relative ability of a state to fight and emerge victorious from an all-out war.
- 10 In multipolar systems, even if there is no desire to take on all the others, smaller military powers also lack the strength to defeat other great powers one-on-one.
- 11 All major wars, if actors meet the requirement of rationality, therefore must be preventive wars. On preventive war, see Jack Levy, "Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War," *World Politics* 40, no. 1 (October 1987); Emerson M. S. Niou and Peter C. Ordeshook, "Preventive War and the Balance of Power," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 31, no. 3 (September 1987): 387–419; Alfred Vagts, *Defense and Diplomacy: The Soldier and the Conduct of Foreign Relations* (New York: King's Crown, 1956), chap. 8; Randall Schweller, "Domestic Structure and Preventive War: Are Democracies More Pacific?" *World Politics* 44, no. 2 (January 1992): 235–69; Stephen Van Evera, "Causes of War" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1984), chap. 2; Woosang Kim and James D. Morrow, "When Do Power Shifts Lead to War?" *American Journal of Political Science* 36, no. 4 (November 1992): 896–922. For the present study, there are two main drawbacks to this literature. First, it fails to differentiate the preventive causes of general wars from more minor wars; that is, it tries to explain too much. Second, by examining only the relationship between two actors, a rising state and a declining state, it ignores how preventive motivations may vary between bipolar and multipolar systems. Dynamic differentials theory seeks to correct these oversights.
- 12 By "bid for hegemony" I do not mean that the state necessarily seeks to absorb completely all the other great powers into a "universal empire," à la Rome. Rather, hegemony simply means the reduction of other great powers to such an extent that the hegemon's security is no longer threatened by any other power alone or in combination with others (I thank Stephen Walt for highlighting this distinction).
- 13 This loss of relative power to sideline-sitters is often known as the "dilemma of the victor's inheritance" (see Richard Rosecrance, *The Rise of the Trading State* [New York: Basic Books, 1986], 34). See also Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, 3rd ed. (New York: Free Press, 1988), chap. 4. Neither author considers the implication of such relative loss for the stability of bipolar versus multipolar systems.
- 14 The first and second principles will also restrain near-equal great powers in multipolarity from simply trying to eliminate one neighboring great power and leaving it at that they know if all-out bilateral war is stalemated, they will lose relative power versus the other great powers; they also know that if they are lucky and quickly defeat the single adversary, they will almost certainly bring down the wrath of the others (due to the potential shift in relative power), and the others' near equality in state-to-state military power will mean overwhelming coalitional superiority. Hence, bilateral great power wars in multipolarity are likely either to be settled early before much relative power is lost (as in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–5), or the victor is likely to be very magnanimous in victory, to avoid the creation of a coalition (as was Bismarck after victories over Austria in 1866 and France in 1871). Accordingly, when great powers in multipolarity set out to eliminate a rival great power, they must do so only as part of an overall plan to continue the war against the others, that is, to make a bid for hegemony; for this, superiority in military power is

- needed. Hitler, for example, hoped to be able to destroy France, Britain, and the Soviet Union one-by-one, but he was well aware that the first act of trying to eliminate France would mean total war with the system. Thus he built a military fighting force superior to any other state taken individually.
- 15 There is one caveat to the above line of argumentation: if one of the great powers is able to convince the vast majority of small states to join its side against a potential threat, then the system will exhibit some of the restraining aspects of multipolarity. As mentioned in my critique of neorealism, many small states, when combined, can shift significantly the distribution of coalitional power if taken by force. The present discussion, however, revolves around getting other states to change sides voluntarily, and in bipolarity this poses a problem. Unlike great powers in multipolarity, small states in bipolarity individually have a hard time switching sides against their great power "ally," since this state has such superior power that it can usually enforce loyalty within its sphere (consider the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the cold war). Thus while small states in bipolarity matter, giving superpowers an incentive to control them, no superpower can typically count on drawing these states to its side en masse through diplomatic means. Hence, the handful of small states that are able and willing to change their alignment will not be able to alter the distribution of power fundamentally; the above arguments would then hold.
  - 16 Since bipolarity lacks the restraining influence of many great powers, the second-ranked state may also feel driven to initiate war if it sees itself as declining, but given its inferiority, it has to believe that decline is even more inevitable and profound before such a risky action is rational.
  - 17 It should be noted that these figures, as heuristic diagrams, are not designed to represent necessarily any actual historical eras. One should also recognize that actors at any point in time generally have less than perfect knowledge of future power levels and trends. Hence, in practice declining powers may hold off from violent measures until some time after what is seen in retrospect as the "peak" in military power; indeed, it is the accumulation of data showing steady decline that accentuates the pessimism driving states to preventive war. To the extent that economic and potential power levels and trends are against the state, it will be less likely to delay such a war, as I will discuss shortly.
  - 18 The more detailed logic behind this conclusion proceeds as follows. In the absence of any dynamic trends, a state will expect that its relative power and therefore its probability of winning any war that does occur will remain the same into the future. If the state initiates the war now, its "expected probability of survival" (EPS) is simply this probability of winning. If it holds off from war, however, it knows that the others might not attack later. For even the smallest likelihood that the others will not choose war later, the EPS for holding off is always greater than the EPS of initiating war now (assuming no offensive advantage).
  - 19 Note that this is essentially a mixed system-type, half-way between bipolarity and multipolarity. It is the "bipolar" element, however, that makes it less stable than at time  $t_2$ : the lower-ranked great powers are simply not as able to deter the declining state's attack on the system as compared to the more purely multipolar situation. This point highlights the value of using a continuous independent variable like differentials of power to explain a continuous dependent variable like the probability of major war. By keeping in mind that it is the degree of power inferiority or superiority between states that matters, there is no need to establish arbitrary criteria for cut-offs between unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar systems; mixed types are allowed. These power differentials can then be used to make finer-grained predictions about the stability of any particular real-world system than are possible in more narrowly "structural" theories focusing on ideal-type polarity alone.
  - 20 Potential power would thus include such things as population size, raw materials reserves, technological levels, educational development, unused fertile territory, and the like. This three-fold conceptualization of power is essentially unique in the literature, as far as I can tell, at least for the purpose of theory-building. The Correlates of War (COW) data set on material capabilities does provide data for military, economic, and what is called "demographic" power, but there is no theory that goes along with the measures that leads to deductively-derived predictions (see J. David Singer, Stuart Bremer, and John Stuckey, "Capability Distribution, Uncertainty, and Major Power War, 1820–1965," in *Explaining War*, ed. J. David Singer et al. [Beverly Hills: Sage, 1979], 159–88). Indeed, almost invariably when the data set is used by analysts, the three measures are collapsed into one index of overall "power" for each state (see William B. Moul, "Measuring the 'Balances of Power': a Look at Some Numbers," *Review of International Studies* 15, no. 2 [April 1989]: 101–21). Other scholars employ the term "potential power," but with different meaning and purpose from the above. For Joseph Nye, potential power is simply any resource that could be translated into "realized power," the ability to change others' behavior (*Bound to Lead: The Changed*

*Nature of American Power* [New York: Basic Books, 1991], 27). Paul Kennedy refers to the “potential” of states typically to cover any form of power that is not strictly military (*The Rise and the Fall of the Great Powers* [New York: Random House, 1987]). Significantly, while Kennedy emphasizes the relation between economic and military decline, he does not build a testable theory of major war founded on concept of potential power. Organski also employs the concept (*World Politics*, 2nd ed. [New York: Knopf, 1968], 340–45), but only to trace historically how states have grown into their present size; potential power plays no role in his logic for war initiation.

- 21 For a consideration of questions on the theory’s logic, see Copeland, “Realism and the Origins of Major War,” 84–97.



# 8    Neoclassical realism

Neoclassical realism addresses two lacunae (Table 8.1). First, Waltz’s neorealism declines to make foreign policy predictions. Waltz is insistent that neorealism’s focus on structure and its exclusion of unit-level characteristics prevents it from being used as a theory of foreign policy; that is, a theory that explains what individual states do and why they do it. Second, both Waltz’s neorealism and defensive structural realism are ill-suited to explaining pathological behavior, i.e. conduct that is suboptimal in light of systemic constraints. Given their joint expectation that balancing is common, they are especially challenged by aggressive state behavior in the face of systemic constraints that are heavily weighted to punish over-expansion and self-encirclement.

Neoclassical realism addresses both these lacunae by using a “transmission-belt” model, where constraints from the international system are filtered through variables found at the unit-level to produce specific state behaviors. In particular, how the external environment is interpreted by decision-makers, and how resources are generated and applied to address challenges identified in that process, play a key role in determining how states respond to pressures from the international system.

Neoclassical realists argue that these intervening domestic-level variables often lead states to adopt policies that are not appropriate responses to systemic constraints. How a state identifies and then chooses to respond to cues from the international system, such as the emergence of a new threat or an opportunity for expansion, depends in large part on how individual decision-makers perceive those constraints, and whether the state has the ability to react to them in a timely and effective manner. States that misperceive signals from the international system would only accidentally behave in ways that are consistent with systemic imperatives. More commonly, misperception would cause a state to devise suboptimal, and perhaps foolish, foreign policies. Likewise, a state that reads the international system correctly but lacks the capacity to extract resources from its citizens should not be expected to respond to systemic challenges in a prudent manner.

Table 8.1    Lacunae addressed by neoclassical realism

		<i>Theory of Foreign Policy</i>	
		<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>
<b>Provides explanation for pathological behavior?</b>	<b>No</b>	Neorealism	Defensive Structural Realism
	<b>Yes</b>		Neoclassical Realism
			Offensive Structural Realism

Since its inception in the 1990s, neoclassical realism has become popular with a new generation of realists, and a common target for liberal and constructivist critics of the realist tradition. Part of the reason for the research program's popularity lies in its ability to explain a number of behaviors that are puzzling for the structural varieties of realism, such as why states often underreact to threats, why they sometimes miss easy opportunities to increase their power, and why they take unnecessary and foolish risks. Critics, however, argue that neoclassical realism's use of an ever-expanding set of domestic variables renders the research program incoherent.

The reading selections included here demonstrate neoclassical realism's explanatory power, as well as its theoretical diversity. Charles Glaser begins by noting that neoclassical realism represents a natural progression within the realist tradition. Just as defensive structural realism emerged as an attempt to address the shortcomings in neorealism, neoclassical realism has developed as an approach that is primarily concerned with plugging the gaps in defensive realism. As Glaser notes, defensive realism gives neoclassical realism something to explain; in particular, state behaviors that defy defensive realism's core logic. Neoclassical realism provides a basis for explaining these behaviors, without relying on ad hoc appeals to domestic politics to explain puzzling or irrational foreign policies.

In a selection from the opening chapter of their book, *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*, Jeffrey Taliaferro, Steven Lobell, and Norrin Ripsman distinguish neoclassical realism from classical realism and neorealism, and explain the research program's top-down model of foreign policy. The authors note that, while neoclassical realism shares classical realism's focus on foreign policy, and neorealism's emphasis on the international system, it is distinguished from the two by its deductive model of state behavior, which explains how systemic constraints filter down through domestic-level variables to produce specific foreign policy decisions.

Different variants of neoclassical realism are illustrated in the three readings that follow. Thomas Christensen and Jack Snyder show how perceptions of the offense–defense balance prior to both World Wars impacted the alliances decisions that were made by the European powers. Randall Schweller details how elite and societal fragmentation inhibit the ability of states to balance against emerging threats. Finally, Colin Dueck explains how political culture and institutional arrangements constrain U.S. decision-makers from launching military interventions abroad. Each reading illustrates neoclassical realism's “transmission-belt” approach while showing how domestic factors can contribute to poor foreign policy choices.

# The necessary and natural evolution of structural realism

*Charles L. Glaser*

From: *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003): 266–79.

A variety of strands of the realist family of international relations theory have evolved and matured over the last couple of decades. Because the strands offer divergent explanations and predictions, critics have recently argued that realism is a failing research program.<sup>1</sup> Critics have also argued that the willingness of prominent scholars to combine realist theories with other levels of analysis reflects an often implicit admission that realism suffers severe weakness.

I argue that the first criticism mistakes divergent predictions for what is in fact theoretical progress.<sup>2</sup> This progress has resulted largely from tightening the logic of structural arguments and does not suffer from ad hoc adaptations of the core theory. What is now important is to appreciate the sources of divergent predictions so that further research can contribute to resolving them. The second criticism overlooks the explanatory power that realism retains when built into a multilevel theory and exaggerates the importance of isolating realism from other levels of analysis . . .

## Structural realism: the basics

Waltz's realism, defensive realism, and offensive realism are each forms of structural realism, which start from the same basic assumptions: (1) states live in an international environment characterized by anarchy—the lack of an international entity that can provide security and, more generally, enforce agreements; (2) states are motivated only by the desire for security—or, more precisely, the behavior of states can be predicted by assuming they desire only security, even if they actually have other motives and goals;<sup>3</sup> (3) states are essentially rational unitary decision makers; and (4) states “black box” their adversaries; that is, because they are structural/third-image theories, they assume that states do not base their assessments of others' motives on information about the domestic structure or workings of these states or on the specific characteristics of their leaders . . .<sup>4</sup>

## Defensive realism versus Waltz: systematic progress

Defensive realism is the logical extension of the structural realism developed by Kenneth Waltz.<sup>5</sup> This observation may seem surprising, because defensive realism diverges quite dramatically from the predictions that Waltz's theory provides.

Defensive realism makes three key modifications that generate the divergence from Waltz's theory.<sup>6</sup> In the context of the debate over whether realism is making progress, the essential thing to appreciate is that there is nothing ad hoc about these modifications. Quite the contrary, each of these modifications follows naturally and logically from the theory's

structural/third-image perspective and its basic assumptions. It is in this sense that the evolution from Waltz's theory to defensive realism is "necessary and natural." Two of these modifications (the first and third described below) involve correcting deductive errors in the standard Waltzian structural-realist argument. The third modification involves introducing structural variables that capture important variation in the constraints and opportunities facing states that cannot be captured by the standard formulation's focus on power. Each of these modifications stands on its own and would, on its own, lead to conclusions that diverge from Waltz's theory; in addition, when combined, these modifications interact to produce larger possible divergences.

Briefly describing these three modifications demonstrates how they follow from structural realism's core logic and assumptions. First, defensive realism challenges the standard claim that international structure generates a general tendency for security-seeking states to compete. The standard argument holds that a state's desire to gain military advantages combined with its determination to avoid the risks of cooperation—which leave a state vulnerable to cheating—force even states that are interested only in security to choose competitive policies. Defensive realism faults this argument for being incomplete: Although cooperation can be risky, competition can also be risky since the outcome of competition is often uncertain and losing a competition can damage a state's security. Thus, by its own internal logic, structural realism requires that states weigh the risks of cooperation and of competition, and does not predict that one approach generally dominates the other.

Second, defensive realism reorients structural realism by emphasizing both the central role of the security dilemma in the logic of the theory and by explaining that offense–defense variables, in addition to power, should influence states' decisions about how best to achieve security.<sup>7</sup> Although the security dilemma is barely mentioned by Waltz, the basic logic of structural realism necessitates that it play a central role. Structural realism assumes that states are concerned only with security. In fact, its claim to great explanatory power comes largely from being able to explain competitive behavior from such minimal and benign assumptions about states' motives. If states could acquire the means necessary to protect their security without reducing others' security, then competition and conflict would never occur between rational states interested only in security. The possibility that competition should at least sometimes occur therefore requires that states face a security dilemma.

At least in principal, the security dilemma can vary over time and between places; that is, how much a state's efforts to increase its security reduce the security of others is a variable, not a constant. The possibility that the security dilemma varies has dramatic implications for structural realism. Based purely on deductive arguments, we have first moved from a theory that purports to predict a general tendency toward competition, to one that appears often indeterminate once its incomplete treatment of risks is addressed, and now to a theory that predicts variation in competitive and cooperative behavior depending on the severity of the security dilemma.

Once we acknowledge this central role for the security dilemma, the introduction of offense–defense variables follows immediately. If the predictions of structural realism vary with the severity of the security dilemma, the question immediately arises: What influences its magnitude? Jervis explains why two offense–defense variables—the offense–defense balance and offense–defense differentiability—are the key to understanding whether the security dilemma is severe or mild.

We can also establish the necessity of including the offense–defense balance in structural

realism from a related, complementary perspective. A state interested in achieving security should assess its prospects in terms of its ability to acquire the military mission capabilities required for defense and deterrence. Considering power (the state's resources compared to its adversaries' resources) is insufficient because power does not translate directly into military mission capability. The relative ease of acquiring offensive and defense capabilities also matters. More precisely, the relative costs of performing offensive missions compared to defensive ones—which reflects the offense–defense balance—influences a state's ability to acquire necessary military capabilities. If defense is relatively easy, that is, the offense–defense balance favors defense, then a state that is less powerful than its adversaries may nevertheless be able to be highly secure; alternatively, if offense has the advantage, the most powerful state in the system may be unable to escape severe insecurity. In other words, while power can tell us a great deal about a state's ability to acquire security, we have strong deductive reasons for adding the offense–defense balance to structural realism's small set of explanatory variables.

Third, defensive realism challenges the commonly stated claim that realism requires states to assume the worst about adversaries' motives and intentions and therefore to focus solely on military capabilities and potential. The basis for this flawed claim appears to be twofold: As a third image theory, structural realism assumes that states do not examine adversaries' domestic characteristics, which leaves them without adequate information to judge motives and intentions; and, given uncertainty about other states' intentions, states cannot afford to risk that others will forego opportunities created by their military capabilities.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, defensive realism argues that relying on worst-case policies can be self-defeating and that under a range of conditions states have preferable alternatives.

The divergence results because the standard claim misconstrues the implications of structural realism's core assumptions. Assuming that states do not rely on unit-level information does not mean that they cannot acquire new information about others' motives. Under a range of conditions, the military policies that a state adopts can communicate information about its motives via costly signals—there are arming policies that a pure security seeker would not adopt, but a greedy state would.<sup>9</sup> Thus, without violating structural realism's third image assumption, states can under certain conditions improve their assessments of others' motives simply by observing and assessing their military policies.

Consequently, states need to consider not only the military capabilities that their policies will provide, but also the information that they will communicate. The possibility that policy choices can communicate information is important because, according to structural realism, a security-seeking state should be interested in convincing its adversary that its motives are benign, since this will make the adversary more secure, which in turn makes the security-seeking state more secure. However, the competitive policies fueled by worst-case planning can have the opposite effect, convincing a rational adversary that the state is more dangerous (i.e., greedy) than it previously believed.<sup>10</sup> Thus, states may often face a difficult trade-off that is entirely overlooked by the standard structural realist argument: Protecting against the worst case risks making the actual adversary more insecure and therefore harder to deter. As a result, states may often want to make this trade-off in the opposite direction—pursuing cooperative or restrained policies that signal benign intentions, even if this somewhat increases the state's own military vulnerability.

Once again, the key point for our discussion here is that defensive realism is not creating a new realist theory, but rather is correcting deductive flaws in what has come to be accepted as the standard structural realist argument. Down the road, the result should not be a proliferation of realist arguments that enjoy equal standing. Instead, either deductively

flawed theories should simply be replaced, or they should be amended/narrowed by adding assumptions and/or empirical boundaries that are sufficient to support their conclusions.<sup>11</sup>

### **Neoclassical realism versus structural realism: defensive realism rescues classical realism**

Neoclassical realists argue that the key to understanding competitive and conflictual international behavior lies in the nature of individual states—specifically their motives and goals—not in international structure.<sup>12</sup> From one perspective, therefore, neoclassical and structural realism can be viewed as major theoretical competitors. However, from another perspective, these theories appear to be more complementary than they are competitive. Neoclassical realism would be much less important and interesting if it were not for defensive realism. As I explain below, the progress in moving from Waltz's structural realism to defensive realism was necessary to clarify the importance of neoclassical realism, which has in turn clarified the importance of new avenues of research.

If Waltz (and offensive realists) were correct about the state behavior that flowed from the international system, then variation in states' motives would matter very little. Across the full range of international conditions, pure security seekers and very greedy states would adopt competitive policies and forego opportunities for cooperation and unilateral restraint.<sup>13</sup> From a theoretical perspective, therefore, there would be little reason to develop explanations that focused on differences in states' motives and goals. The more purely structural theory would be clearly preferable, offering much greater parsimony at little if any cost in explanatory power.

Consequently, defensive realism saves the day for neoclassical realism. By explaining that security seekers should sometimes pursue cooperative policies, defensive realism gives neoclassical realism something to explain—namely, competitive behavior that runs counter to the predictions of defensive realism. More specifically, by identifying the conditions under which security seekers should cooperate, defensive realism focuses attention on the structural situations in which neoclassical explanations can best distinguish themselves from structural explanations. When states pursue competitive policies under these conditions, rational explanations that emphasize the role of greedy states are a natural place to turn . . .<sup>14</sup>

This relationship between neoclassical and defensive realism suggests the ways in which they are in fact largely complementary theories, not primarily competitors.<sup>15</sup> First, the theories cover different parts of the possible empirical domain: Defensive realism claims those situations in which the states can actually be reasonably approximated as pure security seekers, while neoclassical realism claims those situations in which at least one state has significant motives that extend beyond security. In this sense, the theories are complementary, with each purporting to explain cases that the other is not designed to explain. Taken together, the theories can offer explanations across the entire distribution of states' motives. Second, these theories are also complementary, or at least not competitors, because neither attempts to provide an explanation for the nature of states or their frequency. Because these realist theories take motives as given, in contrast to theories that try to explain motives, neither type of realism can make an empirical claim about the relative frequency with which states fall within their respective domains. Thus, which theory explains more depends on the distribution of types of states over time—which is a question for which these theories do not offer explanations—and not on disagreements over how states interact and the means they will choose, given the constraints and opportunities they face—which is the focus of theories'



efforts.<sup>16</sup> Third, a theory of greedy-state behavior should draw on defensive realism, since virtually all states, including greedy ones, are interested in security. Whereas defensive realism explores the options available to security seekers that are uncertain about the motives of their adversaries, neoclassical realism needs to explore how greedy states pursue their dual goals when facing uncertainty about adversaries, and also how states that know that their adversaries are greedy can best deal with them.<sup>17</sup> Schweller's work on the alliance choices of greedy states is a component of this overall effort . . .

### **Progress that combines realism with other levels of analysis**

In addition to the strands of realism discussed above, important work that combines realist theory with other levels of analysis deserves mention as evidence of progress. Obviously this progress cannot be credited entirely to realism, since the work does not rely purely on realist theories. However, realism contributes significantly to this progress, even if at the same time this research suggests limitations to the explanatory power of realist theories. Moreover, these multilevel works are progressive for the field of international relations in general, and this is what really matters.

To ground the discussion, I note a few key examples of this type of work, which develops a defensive realist foundation, and then adds the possibility of misperceptions. Van Evera's work on the causes of war develops some of the key arguments that flow from the combination of security-dilemma and power variables. Van Evera, however, does not insist on a purely structural explanation for the causes of war. Instead, he accepts that structural variables must be analyzed by states, and argues that states often misevaluate the conditions they face because, for example, militaries are often biased in their assessment of the international environment. Snyder and Christensen make a similar move in their effort to analyze the conditions under which states pursue different types of balancing behavior—buck-passing and chain-ganging. They argue that to move beyond Waltz requires adding the offense–defense balance as a key variable. This addition is insufficient, however, because states often misperceive the balance, so they include perceptions of the balance as well. Snyder's study of overexpansion develops a defensive realist explanation of when states should expand and uses this as a baseline against which states' behavior can be gauged. Finding that states often expand beyond what is predicted by this rational baseline, Snyder builds a domestic politics model to explain this suboptimal behavior.<sup>18</sup>

Three observations suggest the important and productive role of realism in this multilevel research. First, in the most effective cases the combination of levels of analysis is not ad hoc but, rather, guided by realist theory. For example, defensive realism identifies the variables and possibilities that should influence states' decisions. Once identified, scholars need to measure these variables to learn if states acted as predicted. If states did not, then one possibility is that they misperceived key variables—for example, the offense–defense balance—in which case a theory of misperceptions can be productively combined with realist theory. Without a theory that identified the importance of offense–defense variables, scholars would not have worked to develop a theory of misperceptions of these variables. Thus, while defensive realism is not sufficient on its own, it is nevertheless providing essential guidance.

Second, realism provides a valuable baseline against which the impact of misperceptions and other distortions can be judged. Although a realist theory of state behavior is not required to measure misperceptions, it is required for assessing the implications of misperceptions, since this requires the ability to compare how states would have acted with and without

misperceptions. Consequently, the existence of misperceptions and other flawed evaluations does not eliminate the analytic value of realist theories, even though one of the theory's key assumptions—rational state behavior—is violated.

Third, assessments of realism are often confused by the inclination to categorize all theorists who have employed realist theories as realists, even if they have also employed other types of theories to create multilevel theories. Although sometimes a useful simplification, it risks creating confusion about realism's assumptions. For example, if a scholar starts with a realist argument and then layers on a theory of misperception, and if we categorize this scholar as a realist, then in effect we have converted realism into a theory that no longer assumes that states are essentially clear-sighted and rational. For the sake of clarity, we are much better off categorizing scholars in terms of the theories they use—whether single-level or multilevel—than categorizing theories by scholars who use them. Although nothing really fundamental is at stake, the labeling exercise can contribute to, or detract from, clarity in the debate.

The confusion over categories, in which researchers who are doing multilevel work are categorized as realist, provides critics of realism with a straw man to attack. To start with, it leaves realism open incorrectly to the criticism that its basic assumptions are constantly being changed in an attempt to match the theory to the data, or that realism has degenerated into a generic rational theory.<sup>19</sup> Closely related to this, analysts who develop multilevel theories appear vulnerable to the criticism that realism is failing because they have been forced to turn to other levels of analysis to build adequate theories. However, as described above, this criticism fails to appreciate that realist theories are of substantial value in the development and assessment of these multilevel theories. Moreover, even if categorized as realists, theorists who build multilevel theories do not want to defend realism as capable of explaining everything. The goal of research should be to develop useful theories that explain a great deal about international relations, not to defend realism. Structural realism is often a natural place to start, because it is a rational, parsimonious theory. If, however, the real world does not match with structural realism's predictions, then drawing in other assumptions about types of states and/or other levels of analysis is often a wise move. A strength of realism is that it can provide valuable guidance on how best to do this.

## Notes

- 1 Vasquez 1997.
- 2 In this paper, although I use a number of terms—including *progress*, *ad hoc*, and *research program*—that have a technical Lakatosian meaning, I use them instead with their everyday meaning.
- 3 This assumption fits well with the purpose of a structural theory, which attempts to explain variations in behavior primarily in terms of variations in international structure, and not in terms of variations in motives and goals. Assuming further that states not only have the same motives but that they are interested only in security provides structural realism with the most basic and parsimonious assumptions: The reason states desire security is sufficiently obvious as to not demand extensive explanation; and by assuming motives along a single dimension, the theory does not need to focus on tradeoffs with other motives. The assumption that states are pure security seekers is essentially consistent with Waltz's theory; he says that states may have motives beyond security, but suggests that their behavior can be predicted without focusing on these nonsecurity motives.
- 4 Although somewhat different from my description, a good brief summary of realism's assumptions is Frankel (1996c, xiv–xviii).
- 5 Waltz 1979.
- 6 This discussion draws heavily on Glaser 1994/95, 50–90. Other formulations of defensive realism

differ somewhat, but are compatible with the thrust of this discussion; see Snyder 1991, esp. 11–12, and 21–26; and Van Evera 1999. Other theoretical work that integrates offense–defense variables with power, and therefore shares important elements of defensive realism includes Walt 1987 and Christensen and Snyder 1990. Note, however, that most of the above works are multilevel theories, combining a defensive-realist foundation with other levels of analysis. In a following section, I explain that categorizing these theorists as defensive realists has created confusion and suggest a way around this problem.

- 7 On the security dilemma, see Jervis 1976, esp. 63–76; Jervis 1978, 167–214; Glaser 1997, 171–210.
- 8 Two other considerations may also contribute to the need for worst-case planning: First, others' motives can always change, so assuming less than the worst leaves the state vulnerable to these changes; and second, even if a state does examine others' unit-level characteristics it will be unable to resolve uncertainties about its motives. Adding in these considerations does not lead defensive realism to call for worst-case policies.
- 9 On costly signaling, see Kydd 1997, 371–400; Glaser 1994/95, 67–70; Fearon 1992; Jervis 1970.
- 10 For a discussion of the rational foundations of the security dilemma, see Glaser 1997, 174–181; see also Kydd 1997. Worst-case policies can also increase the adversary's insecurity by reducing its ability to perform military missions.
- 11 For a similar perspective, see Walt 1997, 932.
- 12 Most prominently, see Schweller 1994, 72–107; and Schweller 1996, 90–121.
- 13 This level of generality does, however, underplay some differences in the competitive behavior that these theories predict. For example, under a range of conditions, these theories make different predictions about states' propensities to balance versus to bandwagon. My discussion therefore underplays the explanatory power of neoclassical realism relative to Waltz's theory, but the thrust of the argument I present in the text remains sound.
- 14 Neoclassical/greed-based theories may not provide the best explanations even in these cases. Theories that rely on suboptimal decision making are their key competitors and . . . defensive realists have tended to turn to these explanations to explain overly competitive behavior. For examples, see Snyder 1991; and Van Evera 1997.
- 15 Schweller (1997, 929) makes essentially this point, arguing that their different scope conditions are the key to understanding the relationship between neoclassical and neorealist approaches.
- 16 It is in this same spirit that Jervis (1976, Ch. 3, esp. 102) observes that analysts who employ the spiral model or deterrence model do not disagree over general models of international relations, but disagree instead about Soviet intentions.
- 17 Such a theory would not be purely structural, since it would allow for actual variation in states' motives, but it could nevertheless draw on structural/third-image arguments by preserving uncertainty about other states' motives and continuing to "black box" state interactions.
- 18 Van Evera 1999; Christensen and Snyder 1990; Snyder 1991.
- 19 Emphasizing the latter criticism are Legro and Moravcsik (1999).

## References

- Christensen, Thomas J., and Jack Snyder. "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity." *International Organization* 44, no. 2 (1990): 137–168.
- Fearon, James. "Threats to Use Force: The Role of Costly Signals in International Crises." Ph.D. dissertation. Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1992.
- Frankel, Benjamin. "Restating the Realist Case: An Introduction." *Security Studies* 5 (Spring 1996): ix–xx.
- Glaser, Charles L. "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help." *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994–95): 50–90.
- . "The Security Dilemma Revisited." *World Politics* 50, no. 1 (1997): 171–210.
- Jervis, Robert L. *The Logic of Images in International Relations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970.
- . *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976.
- . "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma." *World Politics* 30 (January 1978): 167–214.

- Kydd, Andrew. "Game Theory and the Spiral Model." *World Politics* 49 (April 1993): 371–400.
- Legro, Jeffrey, and Andrew Moravcsik. "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" *International Security* 24, no. 2 (1999): 5–55.
- Schweller, Randall L. "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In." *International Security* 19 (Summer 1994): 72–107.
- . "Neorealism's Status-Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?" *Security Studies* 5 (Spring 1996): 90–121.
- . "New Realist Research on Alliances: Refining, Not Refuting, Waltz's Balancing Proposition." *American Political Science Review* 91 (December 1997): 927–930.
- Snyder, Jack L. *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991.
- Van Evera, Stephen. *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997.
- . *Causes of War: The Structure of Power and the Roots of Conflict*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999.
- Walt, Stephen M. *The Origins of Alliances*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987.
- . "The Progressive Power of Realism." *American Political Science Review* 91 (December 1997): 931–935.
- Waltz, Kenneth N. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979.
- Vasquez, John A. "The Realist Paradigm and Degenerative versus Progressive Research Programs: An Appraisal of Neotraditional Research on Waltz's Balancing Proposition." *American Political Science Review* 91 (December 1997): 161–178.

# Introduction

## Neoclassical realism, the state, and foreign policy

*Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, Steven E. Lobell,  
and Norrin M. Ripsman*

From: *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), Chapter 1.

### **. . . Classical realism, neorealism, and neoclassical realism**

Neoclassical realism builds upon the complex relationship between the state and society found in classical realism without sacrificing the central insight of neorealism about the constraints of the international system. Nonetheless, several key questions about the relationship among classical realism, neoclassical realism, and neorealism must be answered: is neoclassical realism merely an attempt to supplement neorealism with unit-level variables—a move that Waltz clearly and repeatedly rejects? Alternatively, does neoclassical realism represent a new research program? By incorporating both systemic and unit-level variables, is neoclassical realism guilty of reductionism—the tendency to explain the whole with reference to the internal attributes and the individual behavior of the units? By incorporating unit-level variables does neoclassical realism violate the structural logic of realism? . . .

Classical realism is primarily concerned with the sources and uses of national power in international politics and the problems that leaders encounter in conducting foreign policy. These issues lead scholars to focus on power distributions among states, as well as the character of states and their relation to domestic society. Twentieth-century classical realists offer either philosophical reflections on the enduring principles of statesmanship or create inductive theories of foreign policy drawn largely from the experiences of European great powers from the sixteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Morgenthau, Kissinger, Wolfers, and others write extensively about the state and national power, but say little about the constraints of the international system. Finally, what we now call classical realism was never a coherent research program, but rather a vast repository of texts written by different authors for different purposes and in different contexts over the course of 2,500 years. Most classical realists were not social scientists; even the twentieth-century classical realists rarely adhered to what are now widely accepted standards of social science methodology.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, the focus of neorealism is on explaining common patterns of international behavior over time. In particular, neorealists address many of the big questions of international politics, such as: Why do wars occur? Why do states tend to balance against powerful states? Why is cooperation difficult and fleeting between states? They address these questions in a self-consciously scientific manner, with an attempt to harness the positivist methodological rigor that the classical realists lacked. They trace the recurring patterns of world politics to the structure of the international system and its defining characteristic, anarchy, which compels states to pursue similar strategies to secure themselves. Utilizing

their most important variable, the relative distribution of capabilities, or the balance of power, they explain a vast array of great power behavior and systemic outcomes . . .

Neoclassical realism shares classical realism's concern for the state and its relation to domestic society. It also defines its mission largely in terms of building theories of foreign policy, rather than theories of the system within which states interact. Nonetheless, neoclassical realists aspire to greater methodological sophistication than their classical realist predecessors. Moreover, they begin with the fundamental assumption of neorealists that the international system structures and constrains the policy choices of states.

What then is the relationship between neorealism and neoclassical realism? Both schools begin with assumptions about the conflictual nature of politics, the centrality of conflict groups, and the importance of relative power distributions. Both research programs assign causal primacy to systemic independent variables. Specific neorealist and neoclassical realist theories, in turn, generate testable and probabilistic hypotheses. It is clear, however, that neorealism and neoclassical realism differ from each other based on the range of phenomena each seeks to explain, or the dependent variable. The former seeks to explain recurring patterns of international outcomes, defined as the range of likely outcomes resulting from the interaction of two or more units in an anarchic environment. Examples would be the likelihood of major war across different types of international systems, the prevalence of hegemonic orders versus balances of power (defined in terms of state capabilities), and patterns of alliance behavior among states. Table [8.2] illustrates the areas of convergence and divergence among classical realism, neorealism, and neoclassical realism.

Neoclassical realism is not simply a refinement of Waltz's balance of power theory nor an attempt to smuggle unit-level variables into the theory to explain anomalies. Nor is it correct to characterize realism as a tightly constructed Lakatosian research program whose "hard core" is synonymous with Waltz's theory, thus rendering any departure from that theory as evidence of a "degenerative problem shift."<sup>2</sup> Neoclassical realism seeks to explain variation in the foreign policies of the same state over time or across different states facing similar external constraints. It makes no pretense about explaining broad patterns of systemic or recurring outcomes. Thus, a neoclassical realist hypothesis might explain the likely diplomatic, economic, and military responses of particular states to systemic imperatives, but it cannot explain the systemic consequences of those responses . . .

### Neoclassical realist conceptions of the state

. . . Neoclassical realism identifies states as the most important actors in international politics. Gilpin writes, "The essence of social reality is the group. The building blocks and ultimate units of social and political life are not the individuals of liberal thought nor the classes of Marxism [but instead] conflict groups."<sup>3</sup> Tribalism is an immutable aspect of the human condition and political life. Human beings cannot survive in an anarchic environment as individuals, but only as members of a larger group. While groups may come into existence for a variety of reasons, the one necessary condition is that they differ from some outside entity. Fear plays a crucial role in group formation, if only because physical security is a prerequisite for the pursuit of any other individual or collective goal. *Metus hostilis* or the fear of enemies—whether manifested in the form of xenophobia directed at internal minorities or a fear of external groups—is indispensable for the creation and maintenance of political groups, because it offers a way of overcoming collective action barriers. The concept of the *metus hostilis* appears, in one form or another, in the writings of Thucydides, Hobbes, Morgenthau, Waltz, and Mearsheimer.<sup>4</sup> Research in the fields of



Table 8.2 Classical realism, neorealism, and neoclassical realism

<i>Research program</i>	<i>Epistemology and methodology</i>	<i>View of the international system</i>	<i>View of the units</i>	<i>Dependent variable</i>	<i>Underlying causal logic</i>
CLASSICAL REALISM	Inductive theories; philosophical reflection on nature of politics or detailed historical analysis (generally drawn from W. European history)	Somewhat important	Differentiated	Foreign policies of states	Power distributions or distribution of interests (revisionist vs. status quo) → foreign policy
NEOREALISM	Deductive theories; competitive hypothesis testing using qualitative and sometimes quantitative methods	Very important; inherently competitive and uncertain	Undifferentiated	International political outcomes	Relative power distributions (independent variable) → international outcomes (dependent variable)
NEOCLASSICAL REALISM	Deductive theorizing; competitive hypothesis testing using qualitative methods	Important; implications of anarchy are variable and sometimes opaque to decision-makers	Differentiated	Foreign policies of states	Relative power distributions (independent variable) → domestic constraints and elite perceptions (intervening variables) → foreign policy (dependent variable)

evolutionary biology and social psychology provides additional support for long-standing realist assumptions about the centrality of in-group/out-group discrimination, intergroup comparison, and competition in political life.<sup>5</sup>

We acknowledge there is no universally accepted definition of the “state,” and the term itself has different connotations within the disciplines of anthropology, history, and sociology, and in the comparative politics and international relations subfields of political science. Nonetheless, Max Weber’s classic definition is often a starting point: “A state is a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use* of physical force within a given territory. Note that ‘territory’ is one of the characteristics of the state.”<sup>6</sup> While Weber’s definition captures the essential coercive nature of political authority and the existence of an administrative apparatus, it fails to encompass cases where territorial control is incomplete (or non-existent) or where the monopoly on the legitimate use of force is contested. Most international relations theorists would conceive of the state as: (1) a set of institutions, (2) placed within a geographically bounded territory that (3) at least *claims* a monopoly on legitimate rule within that defined territory.<sup>7</sup>

Neoclassical realism presents a “top-down” conception of the state, which means systemic forces ultimately drive external behavior. To this end it views the states as epitomized by a national security executive, comprised of the head of government and the ministers and officials charged with making foreign security policy.<sup>8</sup> This executive, sitting at the juncture of the state and the international system, with access to privileged information from the state’s politico-military apparatus, is best equipped to perceive systemic constraints and deduce the national interest. Nonetheless, while the executive is potentially autonomous from society, in many contexts political arrangements frequently compel it to bargain with domestic actors (such as the legislature, political parties, economic sectors, classes, or the public as a whole) in order to enact policy and extract resources to implement policy choices. Therefore, in contrast to liberalism and Marxism, neoclassical realism does not see states as simply aggregating the demands of different societal interest groups or economic classes.<sup>9</sup> Rather, leaders define the “national interests” and conduct foreign policy based upon their assessment of relative power and other states’ intentions, but always subject to domestic constraints. This means that substate actors are far from irrelevant and that the definition and articulation of national interests is not without controversy. On the contrary, threat assessment, strategic adjustment, and policy implementation are inherently difficult and may entail considerable bargaining within the state’s leadership and with other stakeholders within society . . .

### **The neoclassical realist conception of the international system**

Neoclassical realism identifies elite calculations and perceptions of relative power and domestic constraints as intervening variables between international pressures and states’ foreign policies. Relative power sets parameters for how states (or rather, those who act on their behalf) define their interests and pursue particular ends. But what is the neoclassical realist conception of the international system? After all, as even Waltz admits, the international system does not dictate exactly *how* each state will respond within those parameters. David Dessler’s office-building analogy is illustrative. The exterior walls and the configuration of the internal spaces generate broad behavioral patterns for the people working within them. Most office workers do not attempt to walk through walls, crawl through air conditioning ducts, or leave the building via windows on the twentieth floor.<sup>10</sup>

Pervasive uncertainty and potential threats are central to the conception of anarchy in neorealism and neoclassical realism. To return to the office-building analogy, the workers may be aware of hidden trapdoors and that the consequence of falling through them is severe injury or death, but they have no knowledge or control over the placement of these traps. It is not simply that anarchy leaves states unregulated and unsupervised so that war may break out at any time, Jennifer Sterling-Folker observes, "It is instead that the anarchic environment allows death to occur in the first place while providing no guidance for how to avoid it in the short-term and ultimately no means of doing so in the long-term."<sup>11</sup> This lack of guidance automatically renders anarchy a self-help environment. It also suggests that systemic incentives and threats, at least in the short run, are rarely unambiguous. This means there is often not a single, optimal response to such incentives and, due to the operation of the security dilemma, actions designed to counter threats may actually make states less secure . . .

Neoclassical realism accepts the importance of competitive pressures and socialization effects in shaping the internal composition of states. What motivates such adaptive behavior is not the normative appeal of others' practices or domestic institutions, but rather the desire to enhance competitive advantage and the probability of survival. "The nation-state is by no means the teleological end-point of group identification," observes Sterling-Folker, "but its development as the primary constitutive unit of the present global system is explicable as a result of anarchy's imitative dynamics."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, as much of the state-building literature argues, the territorial state simply proved more effective than other polities in early modern Europe in mobilizing internal resources and responding to external threats. This process of intergroup comparison, emulation, and innovation led to the spread of the territorial state as an institutional form, first throughout Europe and later around the world. It also led to the demise of competing institutional forms over time. Thus, the international system is of paramount importance to neoclassical realists, which distinguishes them from inside-out approaches . . .

## Notes

- 1 Ashley Tellis, "Reconstructing Political Realism: The Long March Toward Scientific Theory," in Benjamin Frankel, *Realism: Restatements and Renewal* (London: Frank Cass, 1996), pp.49–51.
- 2 John Vasquez, "The Realist Paradigm and Degenerative versus Progressive Research Programs," *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (December 1997), pp.899–912.
- 3 See Robert Gilpin, "The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism," in Robert O. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p.305.
- 4 See Ioannis D. Evrigenis, "'Carthage Must Be Saved': Fear of Enemies and Collective Action" (PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 2005), esp. chap. 3.
- 5 Jennifer Sterling-Folker, *Theories of International Cooperation and the Primacy of Anarchy: Explaining US International Monetary Policy-Making after Bretton Woods* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), pp. 70–6; Sterling-Folker, "Realism and the Constructivist Challenge"; Bradley A. Thayer, "Bringing in Darwin: Evolutionary Theory, Realism, and International Politics," *International Security* 25, no. 2 (fall 2000), pp.124–51; and Jonathan Mercer, "Anarchy and Identity," *International Organization* 49, no. 2 (summer 1995), pp.229–52.
- 6 Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, vol. II, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 904–05.
- 7 See Michael C. Desch, "War and Strong States, Peace and Weak States?" *International Organization* 50, no. 2 (spring 2006), pp.237–68, at p. 240 (emphasis added).
- 8 See Norman M. Ripsman, *Peacemaking by Democracies: The Effects of State Autonomy on the Post-World War Settlements* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), pp. 43–4; Margaret G. Hermann, Charles F. Hermann, and Joe D. Hagan, "How Decision Units

Shape Foreign Policy Behavior,” in Charles F. Hermann, Charles W. Kegley, and James N. Rosenau, eds., *New Directions in the Study of Foreign Policy* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987), pp. 309–36.

- 9 For discussions of the state in liberal international relations theories, see Andrew Moravcsik, “Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics,” *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (autumn 1997), esp. pp. 514–20; and Moravcsik, “Liberal International Relations Theory: A Scientific Assessment,” in Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (eds), *Progress in International Relations Theory: Appraising the Field* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 159–203.
- 10 David Dessler, “What’s at Stake in the Agent-Structure Debate?” *International Organization* 43, no. 3 (summer 1989), pp.441–73, at p. 466.
- 11 Sterling-Folker, *Theories of International Cooperation*, p.73.
- 12 Ibid.

# Chain gangs and passed bucks

## Predicting alliance patterns in multipolarity

*Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder*

From: *International Organization* 44, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 137–68.

Kenneth Waltz's rigorous recasting of traditional balance-of-power theory has provided the intellectual foundation for much of the most fruitful recent work in the fields of international politics and national security.<sup>1</sup> But there is a tension between Waltz's theory and those who apply it in their practical research agendas. Waltz's is a theory of international politics; it addresses properties of the international system, such as the recurrence of war and the recurrent formation of balances of power.<sup>2</sup> Those who have applied Waltz's ideas, however, have normally used them as a theory of foreign policy to make predictions about or prescriptions for the strategic choices of states.<sup>3</sup>

This is a problem because for a particular state in particular circumstances, any foreign policy and its opposite can sometimes be deduced from Waltz's theory. In multipolarity, for example, states are said to be structurally prone to either of two opposite errors that destabilize the balancing system. On the one hand, they may chain themselves unconditionally to reckless allies whose survival is seen to be indispensable to the maintenance of the balance. This, Waltz argues, was the pattern of behavior that led to World War I. On the other hand, they may pass the buck, counting on third parties to bear the costs of stopping a rising hegemon. This was the pattern that preceded World War II.<sup>4</sup>

For Waltz, as a systemic theorist, this is not a crippling problem. He deduces logically that multipolarity is structurally prone to instabilities, and the two major cases of this century illustrate his theory suitably. But for those who would use Waltz as a theorist of foreign policy, there *is* a problem. To explain, predict, or prescribe alliance strategy in particular circumstances, they need to specify which of the two opposite dangers—chain-ganging or buck-passing—is to be expected in those circumstances. An explanation that can account for any policy and its opposite is no explanation at all. Likewise, a prescription that warns simultaneously against doing too much and doing too little is of less use than one that specifies which of the two errors presents the more pressing danger in particular circumstances.

This does not mean that Waltz's insights about chain-ganging and buck-passing are of no use in a theory of foreign policy. Rather, it means that his ultraparsimonious theory must be cross-fertilized with other theories before it will make determinate predictions at the foreign policy level. Users of Waltz's theory already do this at various levels of explicitness, factoring in military technology, geography, and power variables that go beyond the mere counting of great power poles. In particular, they combine Waltz's insights with the variables stressed in Robert Jervis's version of the security dilemma theory.<sup>5</sup> They also factor in biases affecting how policy makers and soldiers perceive the balance-of-power problem that faces them.<sup>6</sup> By complicating the specification of the state's position in the international system—and in some cases by introducing the role of perception—determinate predictions can be made.<sup>7</sup>

Though a few scholars have de facto been working this way for some time, their method warrants more explicit specification. Toward this end, we will attempt to explain the opposite alliance choices of the European great powers before World Wars I and II, starting with Waltz's theory and adding a minimal number of variables from security dilemma theory and from perceptual theories that are necessary to derive a theoretically determinate and historically accurate account. In a nutshell, we argue that given Europe's multipolar checkerboard geography, the perception of offensive military advantages gave rise to alliance chain-ganging before 1914, whereas the perception of defensive advantages gave rise to buck-passing before 1939. These perceptions of the international conditions constraining strategic choice were, however, misperceptions, rooted in patterns of civil-military relations and the engrained lessons of formative experiences . . .

### **Polarity, the security dilemma, and perception**

To turn Waltz's ideas into a theory of foreign policy that accurately explains alliance behavior before World Wars I and II, two complications must be introduced. First, the variable elements of international structure must be broadened to include not only polarity but also the security dilemma variables: technology and geography. Second, perception of the strategic incentives inherent in the systemic structure must be introduced as a potentially autonomous factor.

Waltz approvingly cites Jervis's writings on the security dilemma as support for the notion that states in international anarchy are condemned to behave competitively. Indeed, Waltz's and Jervis's theories are cut from the same cloth, both stressing dilemmas that stem from the requirements of self-help in an anarchical political order. Both agree, moreover, that the intensity of the security dilemma is not constant but instead varies with the vulnerability of states. Waltz explores the stabilizing consequences of bipolarity, which are due in part to the superpowers' greater self-sufficiency and consequently lesser vulnerability to the vicissitudes of international anarchy.<sup>8</sup> Jervis explores the stabilizing consequences of defensive and deterrent military technologies, as well as geographical configurations that make conquest more difficult. Both see the same problem: vulnerability leads to self-help strategies that leave everyone less secure. Both conceive of the international order similarly: as an anarchy. And both see greater invulnerability as the source of greater stability in international anarchy. There is no reason that their two theories cannot be combined in order to explore interactions between their variables.

These interactions include the connection between offensive advantage and chain-ganging and, conversely, the connection between defensive advantage and buck-passing. In multipolarity, the greater the vulnerability of states (that is, the more propitious the technology or geography for the attacker), the greater is the propensity to align unconditionally and to fight all-out in defense of an ally from the first moment it is attacked. This happens because the expectation of rapid, easy conquest leads states to conclude that allies essential to maintaining the balance of power will be decisively defeated unless they are given immediate and effective assistance. Conversely, the less the vulnerability of states, the greater is the tendency to pass the buck. This is due both to the expectation that other states, even singly, will be able to stalemate the aggressor without assistance and to the expectation that the process of fighting will be debilitating even for a victorious aggressor. Such an aggressor will pose a reduced threat to buck-passing onlookers who remain at their full, pre-war strength. Thus, Jervis's variables provide the determinate predictions that Waltz's theory needs in order to become a theory of foreign policy.<sup>9</sup>



On theoretical grounds alone, we could be entirely satisfied with this minor and parsimonious yet productive addendum to Waltz's theory. Unfortunately, for empirical reasons, still further adjustments are needed to explain alliance dynamics before World Wars I and II. This is because soldiers' and policymakers' perceptions of offensive and defensive advantages before the two wars were almost exactly wrong. Therefore, we need to add a perceptual dimension to explain why technological circumstances of defensive advantage were seen as encouraging offensives in 1914, whereas circumstances that were objectively much more favorable to the attacker in the late 1930s were seen as discouraging offensives.

In principle, any number of perceptual biases might affect perceptions of the structure of international incentives. In fact, however, two main hypotheses enjoy the greatest plausibility. The first is that soldiers' and policymakers' perceptions of international structural incentives, including the offense–defense balance, are shaped by their formative experiences, especially the last major war. Thus, since European wars before 1914 had often been short and decisive, most people expected offensives to succeed. But after the experience of 1914–18, most people expected defensives to succeed.<sup>10</sup> The second hypothesis is that uncontrolled militaries favor offensive strategies, and since civilian control over the military was much greater in the 1930s than in the 1910s, the military-fueled “cult of the offensive” no longer dominated strategic perceptions. Instead, a civilian-based “cult of the defensive,” aimed at finding strategic excuses for buck-passing, may have had an equal but opposite impact.<sup>11</sup> It is not our main purpose here to argue about the sources of such misperceptions. Rather, we are satisfied to note that either of the above hypotheses is parsimonious and can easily be joined with the Jervis–Waltz international system theory to improve the accuracy of its predictions.

The element of misperception is not as foreign to Waltz's theory as one might first imagine. Indeed, Waltz claims that the basic problem of multipolarity is “miscalculation by some or all of the great powers.”<sup>12</sup> In the simpler world of bipolarity, a superpower's responsibilities and vulnerabilities are easier to gauge, and egregious strategic miscalculations are therefore less likely. Of course, Waltz is referring here to random errors of perception and calculation that are inherent in the structural complexity and uncertainty of multipolar conditions; he is not referring to systematic perceptual biases due to cognitive or organizational quirks.

But in explaining the differences between the two multipolar outcomes, Waltz goes much further. For example, he writes that “the keenness of competition between the two camps” led to the chain gang effect in World War I. The “perception of a common threat brought Russia and France together,” he adds. “If competing blocs are seen to be closely balanced, and if competition turns on important matters, then to let one's side down risks one's own destruction.”<sup>13</sup> Waltz's use of the term “perception” here may have been accidental, but we think not. In purely structural terms, the fate of Austro-Hungarian power in 1914 was not more “important” for the European military balance than was the fate of Czechoslovak power in 1938.<sup>14</sup> There was no structural reason for the competition over it to be less “keen.” Consequently, it is entirely appropriate for Waltz to use perceptual language, rather than structural language, in discussing France's and Russia's sense of a common threat.

It is our purpose to make explicit the military and perceptual factors that made competition more keen, alliances tighter, and East European crises seemingly more important in 1914 than in 1938. By doing this, we can account for the differences in multipolar alliance balancing behavior before World Wars I and II and thus rescue Waltz's theory from its predictive indeterminacy. Our proposed theoretical framework is summarized in Figure 1 and discussed in detail below.

The security dilemma		
Polarity		
Polarity	Multipolarity	Buck-passing
	Bipolarity	Neither buck-passing nor chain-ganging

Figure 1 Polarity, the security dilemma, and resulting alliance strategies

## Alliance strategies before World Wars I and II

### *Proposed explanation for the differing alliance patterns*

The two world wars starkly illustrate the consequences of differing assessments of the relative strength of the offensive and the defensive. The strategic situation in these two cases was, in most respects, quite similar: Germany threatened to overturn the balance among the same four leading European powers by establishing its hegemony over Eastern Europe. But because the prevailing perception of the relative strength of offense and defense differed in the two cases, the strategic behavior of the powers in 1938–39 was the opposite of their behavior in 1914.

In 1914, the continental states adhered to essentially unconditional alliances, committing themselves to immediate offensives in full strength to aid their ally with little regard to the circumstances giving rise to the hostilities. In 1938–39, in contrast, the powers tried to pass the buck, luring others to bear the burden of stopping the rise of German hegemony. Stalin said in 1939 that the Soviet Union would not pull others' chestnuts out of the fire, but that is precisely what Russia had done in August 1914 through its premature, ill-fated offensive into East Prussia, an offensive designed to draw German fire away from France during the battle of the Marne.<sup>15</sup>

The aggressors' strategies were also opposite. The originators of the Schlieffen Plan sought to overturn the balance in a single bold stroke, whereas Hitler sought to overturn it through the piecemeal conquest of isolated targets. Finally, the causes of the two wars were essentially opposite. World War I was largely the result of a spiral process in which alliance dynamics magnified the consequences of local disputes, turning them into global issues. World War II, in contrast, has often been considered a deterrence failure in which buck-passing diplomacy by the status quo powers encouraged expansionist powers to risk piecemeal aggression.<sup>16</sup>

Behind these differences in strategic behavior were differing assumptions about the

efficacy of strategic offense and defense. In 1914, quick victories that would decisively overturn the military balance were generally thought to be quite feasible. To uphold the balance and to have an effect on the outcome of the fighting, policymakers believed that they had to conclude binding alliances in advance and throw their full weight into the battle at the outset.<sup>17</sup> In the late 1930s, in contrast, policymakers and strategists who had lived through the trench warfare stalemates of 1914–18 believed that conquest was difficult and slow. Consequently, they thought that they could safely stand aside at the outset of a conflict, waiting to intervene only if and when the initial belligerents showed signs of having exhausted themselves.

We contend that given the constant factors of the multipolar checkerboard configuration of power and Germany's aggressive aims, varying perceptions of the offense–defense balance constitute a sufficient explanation for the differing alliance patterns: chain-ganging before World War I and buck-passing before World War II . . .

## Notes

- 1 Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979).
- 2 We feel no need to take a position on the epistemological debates surrounding Waltz's theory, spurred in particular by John Ruggie and Robert Cox. We are satisfied to accept Waltz's scheme as what Cox terms a "problem-solving theory." For current purposes, we hope to improve its problem-solving utility rather than to address its deeper epistemological adequacy. See Robert Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), especially pp. 208 and 214. See also David Dessler, "What's at Stake in the Agent-Structure Debate?" *International Organization* 43 (Summer 1989), pp. 441–74; and John S. Dryzek, Margaret L. Clark, and Garry McKenzie, "Subject and System in International Interaction," *International Organization* 43 (Summer 1989), pp. 475–504.
- 3 See, for example, Stephen Walt, *The Origins Of Alliance* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987); and Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984). By "theory of foreign policy" we mean a theory whose dependent variable is the behavior of individual states rather than the properties of systems of states. It does not refer to a theory that explains all aspects of a state's foreign policy.
- 4 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 67 and 165–69.
- 5 See Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30 (January 1978), pp. 167–214; Stephen Van Evera, "Causes of War," Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1984; Stephen Van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War," in Stephen E. Miller, ed., *Military Strategy and the Origins of the First World War* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 58–107; Stephen Van Evera, "Offense, Defense, and Strategy: When Is Offense Best?" paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, 1987. For a work that preceded the publication of Waltz's and Jervis's theories but made many similar points, see George Quester, *Offense and Defense in the International System* (New York: Wiley, 1977), especially chap. 10 on alliance behavior in World War I.
- 6 In addition to the above-mentioned works by Van Evera, see Posen, *Sources of Military Doctrine*, and Jack Snyder, "Civil–Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984," in Miller, *Military Strategy*, pp. 139–40. Levy points out that difficulties in measuring offensive and defensive advantage make such judgments problematic for social scientists as well as elusive for policymakers. See Jack S. Levy, "The Offensive/Defensive Balance of Military Technology," *International Studies Quarterly* 28 (June 1984), pp. 219–38.
- 7 By "determinate predictions" we mean that if all other factors (such as checkerboard geography) are held constant, then knowing the polarity of the system and the perceived offense–defense balance will theoretically suffice to predict the alliance behavior of states. Of course, in the real world, other factors having some effect on alliance behavior may not be held constant, making our predictions probabilistic rather than strictly "determinate."
- 8 This is at least implicit in Waltz's arguments about interdependence in his *Theory of International*

*Politics*, pp. 143–46, juxtaposed to his arguments about the relative invulnerability of the bipolar superpowers, p. 172. Note also Waltz's remarks about firms on p. 135: "More than any other factor, relative size determines the survival of firms. Firms that are large in comparison to most others in their field find many ways of taking care of themselves—of protecting themselves against other large firms."

- 9 For related discussions, see Posen, *Sources of Military Doctrine*, p. 232; Van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive," pp. 96–101; Van Evera, "Why Cooperation Failed in 1914," in Kenneth Oye, ed., *Cooperation Under Anarchy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), especially pp. 83–84; and Walt, *Origins of Alliance*, especially pp. 24–25, fn 31, and pp. 32 and 165–67.
- 10 For the theory underlying this hypothesis, see Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), especially chap. 6.
- 11 See Posen, *Sources of Military Doctrine*; Van Evera, "Causes of War"; Snyder, "Civil-Military Relations"; and Jack Snyder, "International Leverage on Soviet Domestic Change," *World Politics* 41 (October 1989), pp. 1–30. On the cult of the defensive, see John Mearsheimer, *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 107, 111–12, and 128; and Van Evera, "Offense, Defense, and Strategy."
- 12 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 172.
- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 165–67.
- 14 For a detailed description of Czechoslovakia's crucial role in the European balance, see Williamson Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–1939* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).
- 15 Stalin's statement of 10 March 1939, cited to Adam Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence*, 2d ed. (New York: Praeger, 1974), p. 263.
- 16 This distinction works only as a rough first cut. There were deterrence failure aspects to the 1914 diplomacy. Conversely, even firm, early deterrent threats might not have deterred Hitler's aggression. For a recent corrective along these lines, see Sean M. Lynn-Jones, "Détente and Deterrence: Anglo-German Relations, 1911–1914," *International Security* 11 (Fall 1986), pp. 121–50. Recent correctives, however, do not negate the main point. Even followers of Fritz Fischer accept that Germany did not want a world war but that it stumbled into it as a result of misguided attempts to ensure German security. For a subtle discussion of these points and a commentary on Fritz Fischer's *German Aims in the First World War* (New York: Norton, 1967) and related works, see Jack S. Levy, "The Role of Crisis Management in the Outbreak of World War I," paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, London, 1989, especially pp. 15–16.
- 17 This argument about World War I, set in a theoretical perspective, is made by Quester in *Offense and Defense*, by Jervis in "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," and by Van Evera in "The Cult of the Offensive."

# Unanswered threats

## A neoclassical realist theory of underbalancing

*Randall L. Schweller*

From: *International Security* 29, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 159–201.

During the late 1630s, Charles I concentrated his energies on the construction of a new royal palace at Whitehall. Designed in the classical style by John Webb, the new Whitehall was to be the fulfillment of the king's lifelong dream to replace the sprawling and obsolete palace that he had inherited from the Tudors with one that would match the splendor and majesty of the Louvre or the Escorial. Charles I desired nothing else than that his surroundings should reflect the magnificence of his rule: "Here, at last, would be a seat of government appropriate to the system of 'Personal Rule' Charles I had established since dispensing with Parliament in 1629. At least until 1639, it was from here that Charles could expect to govern his realms, resplendent amid Webb's Baroque courtyards and colonnades, during the next decade and beyond."<sup>1</sup>

In making such ambitious plans, Charles I displayed supreme confidence that his regime would not only survive but thrive well into the future. Unfortunately for the king, his reign did not last out the 1630s. If the conventional historical wisdom that "the collapse of Charles I's regime during the 1630s appeared 'inevitable'" is correct, then Charles obviously suffered from self-delusion—an unreality all too characteristic of remote and isolated rulers.<sup>2</sup>

International politics, too, has seen many instances of this type of folly, where threatened countries have failed to recognize a clear and present danger or, more typically, have simply not reacted to it or, more typically still, have responded in paltry and imprudent ways. This behavior, which I call "underbalancing," runs directly contrary to the core prediction of structural realist theory, namely, that threatened states will balance against dangerous accumulations of power by forming alliances or building arms or both. Indeed, even the most cursory glance at the historical record reveals many important cases of underbalancing. Consider, for instance, that none of the great powers except Britain consistently balanced against Napoleonic France, and none emulated its nation-in-arms innovation. Later in the century, Britain watched passively in splendid isolation as the North defeated the South in the American Civil War and as Prussia defeated Austria in 1866, and then France in 1871, establishing German hegemony over Europe. Bismarck then defied balance of power logic by cleverly creating an extensive "hub-and-spoke" alliance system that effectively isolated France and avoided a counterbalancing coalition against Germany. The Franco-Russian alliance of 1893 emerged only after Bismarck's successor, Leo von Caprivi, refused to renew the 1887 Reinsurance Treaty with Russia for domestic political reasons and despite the czar's pleadings to do otherwise. Thus, more than twenty years after the creation of the new German state, a balancing coalition had finally been forged by the dubious decision of the new German chancellor combined with the kaiser's soaring ambitions and truculent diplomacy.

Likewise, during the 1930s, none of the great powers (i.e., Britain, France, the United

States, the Soviet Union, Italy, and Japan) balanced with any sense of urgency against Nazi Germany. Instead, they bandwagoned, buck-passed, appeased, or adopted ineffective half measures in response to the growing German threat. A similar reluctance to check unbalanced power characterizes most interstate relations since 1945. With the exception of the U.S.-Soviet bipolar rivalry, a survey of state behavior during the Cold War yields few instances of balancing behavior. As K.J. Holsti asserts: "Alliances, such a common feature of the European diplomatic landscape since the seventeenth century, are notable by their absence in most areas of the Third World. So are balances of power." Holsti further notes: "The search for continental hegemony is rare in the Third World, but was a common feature of European diplomacy under the Habsburgs, Louis XIV, Napoleon, Wilhelmine Germany, Hitler, and Soviet Union and, arguably, the United States."<sup>3</sup> In a continuation of this pattern, no peer competitor has yet emerged more than a decade after the end of U.S.-Soviet bipolarity to balance against the United States. Contrary to realist predictions, unipolarity has not provoked global alarm to restore a balance of power . . .<sup>4</sup>

### **Balance of power as a structural law of nature**

. . . In an era of mass politics, the decision to check unbalanced power by means of arms and allies—and to go to war if these deterrent measures fail—is very much a political act made by political actors. War mobilization and fighting are distinctly collective undertakings. As such, political elites carefully weigh the likely domestic costs of balancing behavior against the alternative means available to them (e.g., inaction, appeasement, buck-passing, bandwagoning, etc.) and the expected external benefits of a restored balance of power. Structural imperatives rarely, if ever, compel leaders to adopt one policy over another; decisionmakers are not sleepwalkers buffeted about by inexorable forces beyond their control. This is not to say, however, that they are oblivious to structural incentives. Rather, states respond (or not) to threats and opportunities in ways determined by both internal and external considerations of policy elites, who must reach consensus within an often decentralized and competitive political process.

### **A neoclassical realist explanation**

Variation in the way states respond to similar changes in their external environment turns on the preferences of relevant political and social actors and the unique structural characteristics of society and government that constitute constraints and opportunities for these actors, all of which leads to one or another political outcome. An explanation for why some states and not others underreact to structural-systemic incentives, therefore, cannot ignore the strategies of either those who are more or less interested in preserving the state or those who, placing other values higher, are unwilling to defend the state and may even seek to overthrow or otherwise destroy it.

Because the probability that a state will balance is a function of the preferences of political elites and social groups, underreactions to dangerous shifts in relative power may arise for one of two reasons: actors' preferences, which may be more influenced by domestic than international concerns, do not create incentives to adopt a balancing policy (even when these same power shifts would cause most other actors to adopt a prudent balancing strategy), or the potential domestic political risks and costs of balancing are too high.<sup>5</sup> The first reason concerns the "willingness" of actors to balance; the second, the "ability" of actors to balance given the political and material hurdles that must be overcome to do so.



This kind of analytic framework—one whose architecture is built on elite calculations of cost and risk—emphasizes the point that statecraft is not simply a function of the particular geostrategic risks and opportunities presented by a given systemic environment, that is, of objective material factors at the structural-systemic level of analysis. Statecraft is also a consequence of (1) elites' preferences and perceptions of the external environment, (2) which elites' preferences and perceptions "matter" in the policymaking process, (3) the domestic political risks associated with certain foreign policy choices, and (4) the variable risk-taking propensities of national elites. Once these unit-level factors have been established, they can then be treated as inputs (state strategies and preferences) at the structural-systemic level to explain how unit- and structural-level causes interact to produce systemic outcomes.

To be sure, there are many factors that might increase the domestic political risks of balancing behavior and raise obstacles to resource extraction. Nevertheless, I posit four unit-level variables that are comprehensive enough to explain variation across space and time in state responses to threats: elite consensus, government/regime vulnerability, social cohesion, and elite cohesion. Elite consensus and cohesion primarily affect the state's willingness to balance, whereas government/regime vulnerability and social cohesion influence the state's ability to extract resources for this task. The combination of these four variables determines the degree of state coherence.

Unlike standard balance of power theory as articulated by Waltz and other structural realists, in which states respond in a timely and systematic way to dangerous changes in relative power, the theory proposed here presents a more elaborate causal chain of how policy adjustments to changes in relative power occurs:

Changes in relative power → elite consensus about the nature of the threat and the degree of elite cohesion → mobilization hurdles as a function of regime vulnerability and social cohesion → continuity or change in foreign policy (i.e., balancing, bandwagoning, appeasement, half measures, etc.)

For incoherent states, the causal scheme that produces underbalancing may be the same as the one above, but the most logical sequence is:

Rise of an external threat → social fragmentation → government or regime vulnerability → elite fragmentation → elite disagreement about how to respond to the threat or elite consensus not to balance → underbalancing

A discussion of each of the variables serves to clarify how these causal chains work and why.

### ***Elite consensus***

Elite consensus/disagreement is the most proximate cause of a state's response or non-response to external threats. To say this is to acknowledge that states do not make policy; governments through their leaders do. Thus, elite consensus is the dependent variable: when there is a consensus among policymaking elites to balance, the state will do so. The only questions are (1) against whom will it balance, and (2) will mobilization hurdles created by social fragmentation and regime vulnerability limit the state's ability to meet the threat? In contrast, when a consensus to balance is absent, the state will pursue some other

policy—one that may or may not be coherent, one that may arise through careful deliberation and political bargaining or simply by default . . .

The key questions with respect to elite consensus and balancing behavior are (1) do policy elites agree that there is an external threat? (2) do they agree about the nature and extent of the threat? (3) do they agree about which policy remedy will be most effective and appropriate to deal with a threat and protect the state's strategic interests?<sup>6</sup> and (4) do they agree on the domestic political risks and costs associated with the range of policy options to balance a threat? Variation in elite consensus on these central issues is a function of the "mix of international and domestic incentives attached to different options, actors' risk-taking preferences, their time horizons, and how they discount costs and benefits."<sup>7</sup>

Balancing behavior requires the existence of a strong consensus among elites that an external threat exists and must be checked by either arms or allies or both. As the proximate causal variable in the model, elite consensus is the most necessary of necessary causes of balancing behavior. Thus, when there is no elite consensus, the prediction is either underbalancing or some other nonbalancing policy option. Developing such a consensus is difficult, however, because balancing, unlike expansion, is not a behavior motivated by the search for gains and profit. It is instead a strategy that entails significant costs in human and material resources that could be directed toward domestic programs and investment rather than national defense. In addition, when alliances are formed, the state must sacrifice some measure of its autonomy in foreign and military policy to its allies. In the absence of a clear majority of elites in favor of a balancing strategy, therefore, an alternative policy, and not necessarily a coherent one, will prevail. This is because a weak grand strategy can be supported for many different reasons (e.g., pacifism, isolationism, pro-enemy sympathies, collective security, a belief in conciliation, etc.). Consequently, appeasement and other forms of underbalancing will tend to triumph in the absence of a determined and broad political consensus to balance simply because these policies represent the path of least domestic resistance and can appeal to a broad range of interests along the political spectrum. Thus, underreacting to threats, unlike an effective balancing strategy, does not require overwhelming, united, and coherent support from elites and masses; it is a default strategy . . .

### ***Government/regime vulnerability***

In its most basic sense, the concept of government or regime vulnerability "asks what is the likelihood that the current leadership will be removed from political office."<sup>8</sup> Specifically, do the governing elites face a serious challenge from the military, opposing political parties, or other powerful political groups in society? Are such groups threatening to prematurely remove the current leaders from office? Have they done so in the recent past?

In a related but more general sense, the concept of government or regime vulnerability seeks to capture the relationship between rulers and ruled at any given moment. Hence, the following questions related to elite-mass linkages are also relevant: (1) is the government's authority based primarily on coercion or is it self-legitimizing in the eyes of the public? (2) is the government meeting the expectations of the people? (3) does it enjoy broad support from the masses? and (4) can it minimize domestic interference in its policy decisions?

These questions go to the heart of a government's effectiveness and political authority and the trade-off between external security and internal stability. Leaders, especially vulnerable ones, cannot simply choose security policies based on their likelihood of neutralizing the external threat or satisfying national ambitions for greater power and influence. They must also consider the domestic costs attached to the policy options. Vulnerable leaders will

typically be more constrained than popular ones, and they will be less effective in mobilizing resources from society. As James Morrow observes: “Leaders and domestic groups often disagree about the appropriate response to a threat. Leaders choose policies for their ability to counter a threat and to provide domestic support. Without the latter, security policies will fail to do the former.”<sup>9</sup> . . .

### ***Social cohesion***

Social cohesion and its opposite, social fragmentation, describe the relative strength of ties that bind individuals and groups to the core of a given society. Social cohesion does not mean political unanimity or the absence of deep political disagreements within society. All societies exhibit normal conflicts arising from various sources and cleavages, including divergent class interests, economic inequalities, competing political goals, ethnic animosities, and so-called normative conflicts (e.g., differences over the definition of national identity, the relationship between religion and the state, culture wars, etc.).<sup>10</sup>

The key to social cohesion is that all members of society accept the same rules of the game; that is, they support the society’s institutions as legitimate and appropriate mechanisms to settle disputes among them no matter how profound their disagreements or grievances (i.e., loyal opposition). Dangerous political divisions exist when groups within society do not confer legitimacy on the institutions that structure it and, even more so, when a significant segment of the population intends to overthrow the state (i.e., disloyal opposition) . . .

The precrisis degree of social cohesion within the threatened state may also explain its choice of arms or allies to deal with the threat—that is, whether the target will be more likely to respond with an internal or external balancing strategy. Internal balancing entails greater and more immediate sacrifices from the general population than the alternative of external balancing, by which the state gives up a measure of foreign policy autonomy to shift a part or all of the burden of balancing the external threat on to another state. Thus, it follows that the more social divisions within a state, the more likely it will be forced to rely on external means (alliances) as opposed to internal means (the mobilization of arms and troops) to balance against the threat. Conversely, the greater the degree of social cohesion in the precrisis period, the more likely the state will be able to resist an attack on its own, or, at the very least, the more likely internal balancing will be a viable option for the state . . .

### ***Elite cohesion***

Elite cohesion concerns the degree to which a central government’s political leadership is fragmented by persistent internal divisions. Elite polarization may arise over ideological, cultural, or religious divisions; bureaucratic interests; party factions; regional and sectoral interests; or ethnic group and class loyalties.<sup>11</sup> The concept of elite cohesion is a continuous variable. At one extreme, political elites are divided into two armed camps, with hypernationalists on one side and disloyal collaborators with the enemy on the other. It is a situation devoid of politics, for there is no room for bargaining among the political factions to reach compromise settlements. At the other extreme, all political elites and groups belong to a dominant party “and they uniformly profess its ideology, religious belief, or ethnonationalist creed—an ‘ideocratic’ configuration that is primarily coerced.”<sup>12</sup> In practice, the structure of political elites within most states falls somewhere between these two ideal types.

There are five relevant questions regarding elite cohesion and balancing behavior. First, is

there a struggle among elites for domestic political power? Second, if so, are there opportunistic elites within the threatened state who are willing to collaborate with the enemy to advance their own personal power or to gain office? Third, if there are multiple threats, do elites agree on their rankings of external threats from most to least dangerous to the state's survival and vital interests? Fourth, are there deep disagreements among elites regarding the question: with whom should the state align? Fifth, are elites divided over the issue of whether to devote scarce resources to defend interests in the periphery or the core?

When elites are fragmented, it is highly unlikely that the state will be able to construct a coherent and effective balancing strategy. Some elites will want to balance against one threat, whereas others will want to balance against another; some will want to invest resources to defend interests in the core, yet others will want to protect interests in the periphery. Moreover, the political costs and policy risks of balancing increase when elites are fragmented. On the one hand, any firm decision will be publicly criticized by opposition elites as too costly and misguided. On the other hand, bargaining efforts to appease opposition groups and thereby gain policy consensus will typically result in incoherent half measures, in which some parts of the state's balancing strategy contradict other parts of it, such that the risk of policy failure increases dramatically. Hence, effective balancing behavior is most likely when elites agree on the target of balancing (i.e., which state presents the greatest threat) and where best to devote scarce military resources . . .<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

- 1 John Adamson, "England without Cromwell: What If Charles I Had Avoided the Civil War?" in Niall Ferguson, ed., *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), p. 92.
- 2 Ibid. This is not John Adamson's view, however.
- 3 K.J. Holsti, "International Relations Theory and Domestic War in the Third World: The Limits of Relevance," in Stephanie G. Neuman, ed., *International Relations Theory and the Third World* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998), p. 106.
- 4 For various explanations of this phenomenon, see the essays in G. John Ikenberry, ed., *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002).
- 5 I am grateful to Alan Lamborn for pointing this out.
- 6 For adjustment failures that take the form of either overly cooperative or overly competitive behaviors in response to rapidly changing strategic environments, see Charles A. Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994).
- 7 Alan C. Lamborn, "Theory and the Politics in World Politics," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No.2 (June 1997), p. 212.
- 8 Joe D. Hagan, "Regimes, Political Oppositions, and the Comparative Analysis of Foreign Policy," in Charles F. Hermann, Charles W. Kegley Jr., and James N. Rosenau, eds., *New Directions in the Study of Foreign Policy* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987), p. 346. I define "regime" in the conventional way as the permanent institutions within the state, whereas "government" refers to the group of people occupying the important positions in the regime.
- 9 James D. Morrow, "Arms versus Allies: Trade-Offs in the Search for Security," *International Organization*, Vol. 47, No.2 (Spring 1993), p. 216.
- 10 See Volker Then, "Introduction," in Peter L. Berger, ed., *The Limits of Social Cohesion: Conflict and Mediation in Pluralist Societies, a Report of the Bertelsmann Foundation to the Club of Rome* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1998), p. xvi. Peter Berger writes: "Essentially the notion of 'normative order' means the way in which any human group tries to answer two fundamental questions: *Who are we?* And, *How are we to live together?*" Berger, "Conclusion," in *ibid.*, p. 355 (emphasis in original).
- 11 Hagan, "Regimes, Political Oppositions, and the Comparative Analysis of Foreign Policy," p.344.

- 12 Mattei Dogan and John Higley, "Elites, Crises, and Regimes in Comparative Analysis," in Dogan and Higley, eds., *Elites, Crises, and the Origins of Regimes* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), p. 18. See also Jaroslaw Piekalkiewicz and Alfred Wayne Penn, *Politics of Ideocracy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).
- 13 Among democracies, there should be a strong relationship between the degree of social cohesion and that of elite cohesion; the latter mirroring the former.

# Neoclassical realism and the national interest

## Presidents, domestic politics, and major military interventions

*Colin Dueck*

From: *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), Chapter 5.

Presidents of the United States have frequently decided to engage in military interventions abroad, but existing explanations of such intervention tend to emphasize *either* third-image (international) *or* second-image (domestic) factors. Third-image theories of intervention point to factors such as the international distribution of power and external threats. Second-image theories of intervention point to factors such as electoral incentives, together with the governing coalition's economic or political interests in war. However . . . neoclassical realist theories generate more explanatory leverage over the national security behavior of states by incorporating both the domestic and international milieus. . . . I put forward a neoclassical realist model and show exactly how, why, and to what extent domestic politics matters in shaping US military interventions abroad. According to this model, when facing the possibility of major military intervention, presidents usually begin by consulting what they perceive to be the national security interests of the United States. Subsequently however, they consider how best to pursue those conceptions of the national interest in the light of domestic political incentives and constraints. These constraints frequently lead presidents to implement the precise conduct, framing, and timing of US intervention in a manner that may appear puzzling or anomalous from a neorealist perspective. In this sense, domestic politics "matters," not as a primary cause of intervention, but rather as a powerful influence on its exact form . . .

### **A neoclassical realist model of military intervention**

. . . A neoclassical realist model begins by positing that state officials inevitably have some conception of the national interest in the face of potential external threats. These conceptions may be misguided but they are nevertheless genuine. The anarchic condition of the international arena forces states to pay close attention to their security, and military intervention is one tool by which policy-makers attempt to pursue this goal. Neoclassical realist authors would add, however, that domestic political or second image causes can have a powerful impact on patterns of military intervention, shaping or skewing foreign policy choices in ways that are surprising from a neorealist perspective.<sup>1</sup>

The process of identifying national interests and then mobilizing resources to pursue those interests is not a given, and cannot even be usefully taken as such . . . [A] wide variety of domestic political factors may influence this process. Military intervention can be very



costly in societal terms; state officials face varying domestic political hurdles in building support for such interventions. Insofar as domestic political conditions are loose and permissive, both the fact and the form of military intervention will tend to follow state officials' perceptions of the national interest. Insofar as domestic conditions are restrictive and constraining, these officials face a difficult choice. They can give up pursuing what they believe to be a necessary policy course, or they can redouble their efforts to mobilize and build support for intervention. In the latter case, this may involve pursuing or packaging the decision in such a way as to create new sources of domestic support. Yet these very efforts to increase support at home may cause a particular military intervention to be implemented in a manner that is puzzling from a neorealist perspective. Under such circumstances, domestic political conditions certainly have a significant influence on the precise manner of intervention, but they cannot be said to be its ultimate cause.<sup>2</sup>

In the United States, domestic political constraints on military intervention are especially noticeable, for both institutional and cultural reasons. As in any democracy, leading state officials contend with an array of interest groups, public opinion, normative considerations, electoral pressures, and legislative prerogatives when making foreign policy decisions. These domestic constraints are multiplied in America by the effects of a deliberate division of power between Congress and the president, a classically liberal political culture, and an exceptionally robust civil society. Nevertheless, even in the case of the United States, state officials have considerable autonomy with which to formulate and pursue foreign policy goals. Presidents typically have more leeway over national security policy than over domestic issue areas. Congress and public opinion set ultimate limits to executive control over foreign policy, but these limitations are usually rather broad and elastic. If a president decides to engage in a given military intervention, he automatically holds major advantages over any potential domestic opponents in terms of prestige, position, and information. Domestic political constraints certainly influence the president, but with decisions for intervention the president also has some ability to bend and shape domestic political constraints. Indeed, presidents invest considerable effort in building domestic support—often successfully—for major military ventures. If the president decides to take the nation into war, a significant portion of American opinion will frequently follow the president's lead and hope for the best, especially during the early phases of intervention.<sup>3</sup> On matters of military intervention, therefore, the president is neither entirely free, nor entirely constrained, but rather "semi-constrained," with a certain range of choice and maneuver in the face of domestic political factors. This semi-constrained condition creates both an opportunity and an incentive. The opportunity is for the president to pursue perceived national security interests in something like the manner he sees fit; the incentive is to do so in such a way as to also create, build, and maximize domestic political support.

A neoclassical realist model of American military intervention, therefore, has the following features. First, executive officials necessarily hold some conception of the national interest, and of potential threats to that interest emanating from developments abroad. Second, when perceived external threats to vital interests seem to necessitate military intervention, executive officials consider how best to pursue such intervention in the light of domestic political conditions. The desire to build domestic support for intervention may, for example, encourage the president to oversimplify circumstances in his public rhetoric. The same desire may also lead him to add or subtract elements of intervention that might have been desirable from a purely international, realist perspective. None of this is to excuse any president's manner of portraying or implementing a given intervention in ethical or legal terms. Indeed, if presidents have some freedom of decision over such matters, as I have

argued, then strictly speaking they cannot be said to have been “forced” into any particular foreign policy decision. Rather, this is only to identify and explain a striking pattern in the manner in which the United States tends to go to war. That pattern, simply put, is that presidents do not undertake major military interventions primarily out of domestic political concerns. Yet the specific forms of intervention, including their timing, implementation, and public representation, are frequently powerfully influenced by domestic political constraints and incentives . . .

## Notes

- 1 Gideon Rose, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,” *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (October 1998), pp. 144–72; Randall Schweller, “The Progressiveness of Neoclassical Realism,” in Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, eds., *Progress in International Relations Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 311–47; Jeffrey Taliaferro, “Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited,” *International Security* 25, no. 3 (winter 2000/1), pp. 128–61, at pp. 132–5, 142–3; Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), chap. 2; Colin Dueck, “Realism, Culture and Grand Strategy: Explaining America’s Peculiar Path to World Power,” *Security Studies* 14, no. 2 (winter 2004/5), pp. 195–231.
- 2 Thomas Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–1958* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 3–7, 13, 28; Charles Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 22–3; Michael Mastanduno, David A. Lake, and G. John Ikenberry, “Toward a Realist Theory of State Action,” *International Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (December 1989), pp. 457–74; Randall L. Schweller, “Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing,” *International Security* 29, no. 2 (fall 2004), pp. 159–201, at pp. 161, 169.
- 3 Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro, *The Rational Public* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 348–50; Jon Western, *Selling Intervention and War: The Presidency, the Media, and the American Public* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), pp. 4–5, 16–17.

## **Section Two**

# **Critiques and responses**

This page intentionally left blank

## 9 Engaging liberal critiques

Realists and liberals have long debated questions that lie at the heart of international relations. As noted in Chapter 2, at least since the publication of E.H. Carr's seminal *The Twenty Years' Crisis* in 1939, adherents of the two traditions have squared off over questions about human nature and the causes of war, collective security arrangements and the maintenance of peace, and economic interdependence and its effect on international stability. Although recent disagreements have focused more narrowly on issues of preference formation and the relationship between democracy and peace, the realism–liberalism debate remains critical for understanding how international politics works, and it continues to have a tremendous impact on the foreign policy decisions that states make. For example, a central feature of U.S. foreign policy since the end of the Cold War has been the belief that democratic regime type plays a role in fostering international peace. Several U.S. presidents have cited the liberal argument that democracies do not go to war with each other to justify American promotion of democracy around the world. Realists usually doubt that regime type has the pacifying effects attributed to it by liberals, and hence they typically question whether democracy promotion should continue to be a part of U.S. policy.

These debates are reflected in the readings in this chapter. Andrew Moravcsik has recently reinvented the liberal approach with a powerful reformulation of classical liberalism as a rational theory of state preference formation. Moravcsik's article, "Taking preferences seriously," suggests that foreign policy is primarily a reflection of the desires of the most powerful groups found in domestic society. Liberalism takes a bottom-up view, suggesting that the state is responsive to coalitions of social actors. State behavior is then the product of each state trying to satisfy those preferences, while operating under the constraints raised by what other states want.

Moravcsik sees preferences as determined by a domestic bargaining process where multiple viewpoints are represented. This approach allows for a good deal of variation in state interests. This stands in sharp contrast to neorealism, and to offensive and defensive structural realism, all of which assume that states are autonomous actors with relatively fixed interests that are a product of external systemic pressures. Neoclassical realism is the closest tradition to liberalism, since its proponents also believe that state preferences can vary, and that behavior is at least partly explained by domestic politics. In neoclassical realism, however, the baseline is typically provided by external pressure from the international system, and the domestic components of the explanation act as intervening mechanisms that explain faulty foreign policy choices. Moravcsik, by contrast, conceives of preference formation as process where demands from societal interest groups filter up to form national-level policy decisions.

In "Is anybody not an IR liberal?" Brian Rathbun notes the centrality of the realist–liberal

divide to international relations theory. However, Rathbun argues that, notwithstanding Moravcsik's essay, liberalism lacks a coherent statement of its core assumptions. Whether defined by its dependent variable (cooperation) or units of analysis (sub-state actors), liberalism casts too wide a net. Too many theories are captured by the liberal paradigm in this overly broad approach, regardless of their underlying logic or core assumptions. According to Rathbun, there is nothing uniquely liberal about Moravcsik's theory of preference formation. Instead, Moravcsik labels his theory "liberalism" simply because it uses domestic politics to explain foreign policy. According to Rathbun, the result of this type of theoretical appropriation is to exclude other approaches, including realism, from using the domestic-level of analysis in their explanations of international politics.

In the next two reading selections, liberal IR scholar John Owen and realist Christopher Layne provide perspectives on opposing sides of the debate on the democratic peace theory. Owen suggests that liberal ideology and democratic political institutions combine to keep democracies from waging war with each other, while the absence of these factors in autocratic states explains why democracies sometimes wage war with non-democracies. Layne challenges the democratic peace theory's explanation for the lack of war between liberal states. Layne notes that the democratic peace theory not only predicts peace between democracies, but also that the peace was caused by that domestic political arrangement. Hence, a process trace of case studies involving crises where wars were avoided should show those causal mechanisms operating. Layne examines four such crises involving democratic states. He concludes that it was realist considerations of material power, and not democratic norms, that kept the feuding parties from fighting each other.



# Taking preferences seriously

## A liberal theory of international politics

*Andrew Moravcsik*

From: *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (Fall 1997): 513–53.

This article reformulates liberal international relations (IR) theory in a nonideological and nonutopian form appropriate to empirical social science. Liberal IR theory elaborates the insight that state–society relations—the relationship of states to the domestic and transnational social context in which they are embedded—have a fundamental impact on state behavior in world politics. Societal ideas, interests, and institutions influence state behavior by shaping state preferences, that is, the fundamental social purposes underlying the strategic calculations of governments. For liberals, the configuration of state preferences matters most in world politics—not, as realists argue, the configuration of capabilities and not, as institutionalists (that is, functional regime theorists) maintain, the configuration of information and institutions. This article codifies this basic liberal insight in the form of three core theoretical assumptions, derives from them three variants of liberal theory, and demonstrates that the existence of a coherent liberal theory has significant theoretical, methodological, and empirical implications. Restated in this way, liberal theory deserves to be treated as a paradigmatic alternative empirically coequal with and analytically more fundamental than the two dominant theories in contemporary IR scholarship: realism and institutionalism.

Grounding liberal theory in a set of core social scientific assumptions helps overcome a disjuncture between contemporary empirical research on world politics and the language employed by scholars to describe IR as a field. Liberal hypotheses stressing variation in state preferences play an increasingly central role in IR scholarship. These include explanations stressing the causal importance of state–society relations as shaped by domestic institutions (for example, the “democratic peace”), by economic interdependence (for example, endogenous tariff theory), and by ideas about national, political, and socioeconomic public goods provision (for example, theories about the relationship between nationalism and conflict). Liberal hypotheses do not include, for reasons clarified later, functional regime theory. Yet the conceptual language of IR theory has not caught up with contemporary research. IR theorists continue to speak as if the dominant theoretical cleavage in the field were the dichotomy between realism and (“neoliberal”) institutionalism. The result: liberal IR theory of the kind outlined earlier is generally ignored as a major paradigmatic alternative.

Worse, its lack of paradigmatic status has permitted critics to caricature liberal theory as a normative, even utopian, ideology. Postwar realist critics such as Hans Morgenthau and E. H. Carr took rhetorical advantage of liberalism’s historical role as an ideology to contrast its purported altruism (“idealism,” “legalism,” “moralism,” or “utopianism”) with realism’s “theoretical concern with human nature as it actually is [and] historical processes as they actually take place.”<sup>1</sup> Forty years later, little has changed. Robert Gilpin’s influential typology in international political economy juxtaposes a positive mercantilist

view (“politics determines economics”) against a narrower and conspicuously normative liberal one (“economics should determine politics”). Kenneth Waltz, a realist critic, asserts that “if the aims . . . of states become matters of . . . central concern, then we are forced back to the descriptive level; and from simple descriptions no valid generalizations can be drawn.”<sup>2</sup>

Liberals have responded to such criticisms not by proposing a unified set of positive social scientific assumptions on which a nonideological and nonutopian liberal theory can be based, as has been done with considerable success for realism and institutionalism, but by conceding its theoretical incoherence and turning instead to intellectual history. It is widely accepted that any nontautological social scientific theory must be grounded in a set of positive assumptions from which arguments, explanations, and predictions can be derived.<sup>3</sup> Yet surveys of liberal IR theory either collect disparate views held by “classical” liberal publicists or define liberal theory teleologically, that is, according to its purported optimism concerning the potential for peace, cooperation, and international institutions in world history. Such studies offer an indispensable source of theoretical and normative inspiration. Judged by the more narrowly social scientific criteria adopted here, however, they do not justify reference to a distinct “liberal” IR theory.

Leading liberal IR theorists freely concede the absence of coherent microfoundational assumptions but conclude therefrom that a liberal IR theory in the social scientific sense *cannot* exist. Robert Keohane, an institutionalist sympathetic to liberalism, maintains that “in contrast to Marxism and Realism, Liberalism is not committed to ambitious and parsimonious structural theory.” Michael Doyle, a pioneer in analyzing the “democratic peace,” observes that liberal IR theory, unlike others, lacks “canonical” foundations. Mark Zacher and Richard Matthew, sympathetic liberals, assert that liberalism should be considered an “approach,” not a theory, since “its propositions cannot be . . . deduced from its assumptions.”<sup>4</sup> Accurate though this may be as a characterization of intellectual history and current theory, it is second-best social science.

I seek to move beyond this unsatisfactory situation by proposing a set of core assumptions on which a general restatement of positive liberal IR theory can be grounded . . .

### **Core assumptions of liberal IR theory**

Liberal IR theory’s fundamental premise—that the relationship between states and the surrounding domestic and transnational society in which they are embedded critically shapes state behavior by influencing the social purposes underlying state preferences—can be restated in terms of three core assumptions. These assumptions are appropriate foundations of any social theory of IR: they specify the nature of societal actors, the state, and the international system.

#### *Assumption 1: The primacy of societal actors*

*The fundamental actors in international politics are individuals and private groups, who are on the average rational and risk-averse and who organize exchange and collective action to promote differentiated interests under constraints imposed by material scarcity, conflicting values, and variations in societal influence.*

Liberal theory rests on a “bottom-up” view of politics in which the demands of individuals and societal groups are treated as analytically prior to politics. Political action is embedded in domestic and transnational civil society, understood as an aggregation of boundedly

rational individuals with differentiated tastes, social commitments, and resource endowments. Socially differentiated individuals define their material and ideational interests independently of politics and then advance those interests through political exchange and collective action.<sup>5</sup> Individuals and groups are assumed to act rationally in pursuit of material and ideal welfare.<sup>6</sup>

For liberals, the definition of the interests of societal actors is theoretically central. Liberal theory rejects the utopian notion that an *automatic* harmony of interest exists among individuals and groups in society; scarcity and differentiation introduce an inevitable measure of competition. Where social incentives for exchange and collective action are perceived to exist, individuals and groups exploit them: the greater the expected benefits, the stronger the incentive to act. In pursuing these goals, individuals are on the average risk-averse; that is, they strongly defend existing investments but remain more cautious about assuming cost and risk in pursuit of new gains. What is true about people on the average, however, is not necessarily true in every case: some individuals in any given society may be risk-acceptant or irrational.

Liberal theory seeks to generalize about the social conditions under which the behavior of self-interested actors converges toward cooperation or conflict. Conflictual societal demands and the willingness to employ coercion in pursuit of them are associated with a number of factors, three of which are relevant to this discussion: divergent fundamental beliefs, conflict over scarce material goods, and inequalities in political power. Deep, irreconcilable differences in beliefs about the provision of public goods, such as borders, culture, fundamental political institutions, and local social practices, promote conflict, whereas complementary beliefs promote harmony and cooperation. Extreme scarcity tends to exacerbate conflict over resources by increasing the willingness of social actors to assume cost and risk to obtain them. Relative abundance, by contrast, lowers the propensity for conflict by providing the opportunity to satisfy wants without inevitable conflict and giving certain individuals and groups more to defend. Finally, where inequalities in societal influence are large, conflict is more likely. Where social power is equitably distributed, the costs and benefits of actions are more likely to be internalized to individuals—for example, through the existence of complex, cross-cutting patterns of mutually beneficial interaction or strong and legitimate domestic political institutions—and the incentive for selective or arbitrary coercion is dampened. By contrast, where power asymmetries permit groups to evade the costs of redistributing goods, incentives arise for exploitative, rent-seeking behavior, even if the result is inefficient for society as a whole.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Assumption 2: Representation and state preferences*

*States (or other political institutions) represent some subset of domestic society, on the basis of whose interests state officials define state preferences and act purposively in world politics.*

In the liberal conception of domestic politics, the state is not an actor but a representative institution constantly subject to capture and recapture, construction and reconstruction by coalitions of social actors. Representative institutions and practices constitute the critical “transmission belt” by which the preferences and social power of individuals and groups are translated into state policy. Individuals turn to the state to achieve goals that private behavior is unable to achieve efficiently.<sup>8</sup> Government policy is therefore constrained by the underlying identities, interests, and power of individuals and groups (inside and outside the state apparatus) who constantly pressure the central decision makers to pursue policies consistent with their preferences.

This is not to adopt a narrowly pluralist view of domestic politics in which all individuals and groups have equal influence on state policy, nor one in which the structure of state institutions is irrelevant. No government rests on universal or unbiased political representation; every government represents some individuals and groups more fully than others. In an extreme hypothetical case, representation might empower a narrow bureaucratic class or even a single tyrannical individual, such as an ideal-typical Pol Pot or Josef Stalin. Between theoretical extremes of tyranny and democracy, many representative institutions and practices exist, each of which privileges particular demands; hence the nature of state institutions, alongside societal interests themselves, is a key determinant of what states do internationally . . .

Societal pressures transmitted by representative institutions and practices alter “state preferences.” This term designates an ordering among underlying substantive outcomes that may result from international political interaction. Here it is essential—particularly given the inconsistency of common usage—to avoid conceptual confusion by keeping state “preferences” distinct from national “strategies,” “tactics,” and “policies,” that is, the particular transient bargaining positions, negotiating demands, or policy goals that constitute the everyday currency of foreign policy. State preferences, as the concept is employed here, comprise a set of fundamental interests defined across “states of the world.” Preferences are by definition causally independent of the strategies of other actors and, therefore, prior to specific interstate political interactions, including external threats, incentives, manipulation of information, or other tactics. By contrast, strategies and tactics—sometimes also termed “preferences” in game-theoretical analyses—are policy options defined across intermediate political aims, as when governments declare an “interest” in “maintaining the balance of power,” “containing” or “appeasing” an adversary, or exercising “global leadership.”<sup>9</sup> Liberal theory focuses on the consequences for state behavior of shifts in fundamental preferences, not shifts in the strategic circumstances under which states pursue them . . .

*Assumption 3: Interdependence and the international system*

*The configuration of interdependent state preferences determines state behavior.*

For liberals, state behavior reflects varying patterns of state preferences. States require a “purpose,” a perceived underlying stake in the matter at hand, in order to provoke conflict, propose cooperation, or take any other significant foreign policy action. The precise nature of these stakes drives policy. This is not to assert that each state simply pursues its ideal policy, oblivious of others; instead, each state seeks to realize *its* distinctive preferences under varying constraints imposed by the preferences of *other states*. Thus liberal theory rejects not just the realist assumption that state preferences must be treated as if naturally conflictual, but equally the institutionalist assumption that they should be treated as if they were partially convergent, compromising a collective action problem.<sup>10</sup> To the contrary, liberals causally privilege variation in the configuration of state preferences, while treating configurations of capabilities and information as if they were either fixed constraints or endogenous to state preferences.

The critical theoretical link between state preferences, on the one hand, and the behavior of one or more states, on the other, is provided by the concept of policy interdependence. Policy interdependence is defined here as the set of costs and benefits created for foreign societies when dominant social groups in a society seek to realize their preferences, that is, the pattern of transnational externalities resulting from attempts to pursue national

distinctive purposes. Liberal theory assumes that the pattern of interdependent state preferences imposes a binding constraint on state behavior . . .

### Liberal theory as systemic theory

These liberal assumptions, in particular the third—in essence, “what states want is the primary determinant of what they do”—may seem commonsensical, even tautological. Yet mainstream IR theory has uniformly rejected such claims for the past half-century. At the heart of the two leading contemporary IR theories, realism and institutionalism, is the belief that state behavior has *ironic* consequences.<sup>11</sup> Power politics and informational uncertainty constrain states to pursue second- and third-best strategies strikingly at variance with their underlying preferences.<sup>12</sup> Thus varying state preferences should be treated as if they were irrelevant, secondary, or endogenous. In his classic definition of realism Morgenthau contrasts it to “two popular fallacies: the concern with motives and the concern with ideological preferences.”<sup>13</sup> Neorealist Waltz’s central objection to previous, “reductionist” theories is that in world politics “results achieved seldom correspond to the intentions of actors”; hence “no valid generalizations can logically be drawn” from an examination of intentions.<sup>14</sup> Though the interests it assumes are different, Keohane’s institutionalism relies on a similar as if assumption: it “takes the existence of mutual interests as given and examines the conditions under which they will lead to cooperation.”<sup>15</sup> In short, Powell observes that “structural theories . . . lack a theory of preferences over outcomes.”<sup>16</sup> What states do is primarily determined by strategic considerations—what they can get or what they know—which in turn reflect their international political environment. In short, variation in means, not ends, matters most.<sup>17</sup>

Liberal theory reverses this assumption: *Variation in ends, not means, matters most*. Realists and institutionalists, as well as formal theorists who seek to integrate the two, criticize this core liberal assumption because it appears at first glance to rest on what Waltz terms a “reductionist” rather than a “systemic” understanding of IR. In other words, liberalism appears to be a purely “domestic” or “unit-level” theory that ignores the international environment. In particular, realists are skeptical of this view because it appears at first glance to be grounded in the utopian expectation that every state can do as it pleases. This commonplace criticism is erroneous for two important reasons.

First, state preferences may reflect patterns of transnational *societal* interaction. While state preferences are (by definition) invariant in response to changing interstate political and strategic circumstances, they may well vary in response to a changing transnational *social* context. In the political economy for foreign economic policy, for example, social demands are derived not simply from “domestic” economic assets and endowments, but from the relative position of those assets and endowments in global markets. Similarly, the position of particular values in a transnational cultural discourse may help define their meaning in each society. In this regard, liberalism does not draw a strict line between domestic and transnational levels of analysis.<sup>18</sup>

A second and more Waltzian reason why the charge of “reductionism” is erroneous is that according to liberal theory the expected behavior of any single state—the strategies it selects and the systemic constraints to which it adjusts—reflect not simply its own preferences, but the configuration of preferences of *all* states linked by patterns of significant policy interdependence. National leaders must always think systemically about their position within a structure composed of the preferences of other states. Since the pattern of and interdependence among state preferences, like the distribution of capabilities and the

distribution of information and ideas, lies outside the control of any single state, it conforms to Waltz's own definition of systemic theory, whereby interstate interactions are explained by reference to "how [states] stand in relation to one another."<sup>19</sup> Hence the causal preeminence of state preferences does not imply that states always get what they want.

One implication of liberalism's systemic, structural quality is that, contra Waltz, it can explain not only the "foreign policy" goals of individual states but the "systemic" outcomes of interstate interactions. That systemic predictions can follow from domestic theories of preferences should be obvious simply by inspecting the literature on the democratic peace . . .<sup>20</sup>

The liberal claim that the pattern of interdependence among state preferences is a primary determinant not just of individual foreign policies, but of systemic outcomes, is commonsensical. Nations are rarely prepared to expend their entire economic or defense capabilities, or to mortgage their entire domestic sovereignty, in pursuit of any single foreign policy goal. Few wars are total, few peaces Carthaginian. Treating the willingness of states to expend resources in pursuit of foreign policy goals as a strict function of existing capabilities thus seems unrealistic. On the margin, the binding constraint is instead generally "resolve" or "determination"—the *willingness* of governments to mobilize and expend social resources for foreign policy purposes.

Extensive empirical evidence supports this assumption. Even in "least likely" cases, where political independence and territorial integrity are at stake and military means are deployed, relative capabilities do not necessarily determine outcomes. A "strong preference for the issue at stake can compensate for a deficiency in capabilities," as demonstrated by examples like the Boer War, Hitler's remilitarization of the Rhineland, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Chechnya. In each case the relative intensity of state preferences reshaped the outcome to the advantage of the "weak."<sup>21</sup> Such examples suggest that the liberal view of power politics, properly understood, generates plausible explanations not just of harmony and cooperation among nations, but of the full range of phenomena central to the study of world politics, from peaceful economic exchange to brutal guerrilla warfare . . .

## Notes

- 1 See Morgenthau 1960, 4; Keohane 1989, 68, n. 17; and Howard 1978, 134.
- 2 See Waltz 1979, 65, 27; Gilpin 1975, 27 (emphasis in original); and Gilpin 1987.
- 3 See Bueno de Mesquita 1996, 64–65; and Keohane 1986.
- 4 See Keohane 1990, 166, 172–73; Doyle 1986, 1152; Zacher and Matthew 1992, 2; Matthew and Zacher 1995, 107–11, 117–20; Hoffmann 1987, 1995; and Nye 1988.
- 5 This does not imply a "pre-social" conception of the individual unencumbered by nation, community, family, or other collective identities but only that these identities enter the political realm when individuals and groups engage in political exchange on the basis of them; see, for example, Coleman 1990.
- 6 Kant 1991, 44.
- 7 Milgrom and Roberts 1990, 86–87.
- 8 Representative political institutions and practices result from prior contracts and can generally be taken for granted in explaining foreign policy; but where the primary interests and allegiances of individuals and private groups are transferred to subnational or supranational institutions empowered to represent them effectively, a liberal analysis would naturally shift to these levels.
- 9 The phrase "country A changed its preferences in response to an action by country B" is thus a misuse of the term as defined here, implying less than consistently rational behavior; see Sebenius 1991, 207.
- 10 Keohane 1984, 10; 1986, 193. Note that these are all "as if" assumptions. The world must be consistent with them, but need not fulfill them precisely.
- 11 What about Marxism? Marxism provides distinctive normative insights (Doyle 1997), but its



- nonteleological positive assumptions—the centrality of domestic economic interests, the importance of transnational interdependence, the state as a representative of dominant social forces—are quite compatible with this restatement of liberalism. For examples, see the contribution by Frieden and Rogowski in Keohane and Milner 1996.
- 12 Waltz 1979, 60–67, 93–97.
  - 13 The resulting “autonomy of the political” in geopolitics gives realism its “distinctive intellectual and moral attitude”; see Morgenthau 1960, 5–7. The fact that Morgenthau distinguished nonrealist elements of his own thought illustrates a further danger of defining realism not in terms of social scientific assumptions, but in terms of its intellectual history, that is, assuming that everything a “realist” wrote constitutes a coherent realist theory; see Morgenthau 1960, 5, 227.
  - 14 Waltz follows Morgenthau almost verbatim: “Neo-realism establishes the autonomy of international politics and thus makes a theory about it possible”; see Waltz 1979, 29, and also 65–66, 79, 90, 108–12, 196–98, 271.
  - 15 See Keohane 1984, 6; and Hellmann and Wolf 1993.
  - 16 Powell 1994, 318.
  - 17 Ruggie 1983, 107–10.
  - 18 For example, see Gourevitch 1976 [error in original. Date should read 1978].
  - 19 Ruggie 1983, 90–91.
  - 20 For a more general argument, see Elman 1996, especially 58–59.
  - 21 See Morrow 1988, 83–84; and Mack 1975.

## References

- Bueno de Mesquita, Bruce. “The Benefits of a Social Scientific Approach to Studying International Relations.” In *Explaining International Relations Since 1945*, edited by Ngaire Woods. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Coleman, James S. *Foundations of Social Theory*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990.
- Doyle, Michael. “Liberalism and World Politics.” *American Political Science Review* 80 (December 1986): 1151–69.
- . *Ways of War and Peace*. New York: Norton, 1997.
- Elman, Colin. “Horses for Courses: Why Not Neorealist Theories of Foreign Policy?” *Security Studies* 6 (Autumn 1996): 45–90.
- Gilpin, Robert. *U.S. Power and the Multinational Corporation: The Political Economy of Direct Foreign Investment*. New York: Basic Books, 1975.
- . *The Political Economy of International Relations*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989 [error in original. Date should read 1987].
- Gourevitch, Peter. “The Second Image Reversed: The International Sources of Domestic Politics.” *International Organization* 32 (Autumn 1978): 881–912.
- Hellmann, Gunther, and Reinhard Wolf. “Neorealism, Neoliberal Institutionalism, and the Future of NATO.” *Security Studies* 3 (Autumn 1993): 3–43.
- Hoffmann, Stanley. “Liberalism and International Affairs.” In *Essays in the Theory and Practice of International Politics*, edited by Janus and Minerva Hoffmann, 394–417. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1987.
- . “The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism.” *Foreign Policy* 98 (Spring 1995): 159–79.
- Howard, Michael. *War and the Liberal Conscience*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1978.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Kant: Political Writings*. 2d ed. Edited by Hans Reiss. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Keohane, Robert O. *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984.
- . “Theory of World Politics: Structural Realism and Beyond.” In *Neo-Realism and its Critics*, edited by Robert O. Keohane, 158–203. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

- . *International Institutions and State Power: Essays in International Relations Theory*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1989.
- . "International Liberalism Reconsidered." In *The Economic Limits to Modern Politics*, edited by John Dunn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Keohane, Robert O., and Helen V. Milner, eds. *Internationalization and Domestic Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Keohane, Robert O., and Joseph S. Nye. *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition*. 2d ed. Boston: Little, Brown, 1989.
- Mack, Andrew J. R. "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetrical Conflict." *World Politics* 27 (January 1975): 175–200.
- Matthew, Richard A., and Mark W. Zacher. "Liberal International Theory: Common Threads, Divergent Strands." In *Controversies in International Relations Theory: Realism and the Neo-Liberal Challenge*, edited by Charles Kegley, 107–50. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995.
- Milgrom, Paul, and John Roberts. "Bargaining, Influence Costs, and Organization." In *Perspectives on Positive Political Economy*, edited by James E. Alt and Kenneth A. Schepsle, 57–89. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Morgenthau, Hans J. *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. 3d ed. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1960.
- Morrow, James D. "Social Choice and System Structure in World Politics." *World Politics* 41 (October 1988): 75–99.
- Nye, Joseph S. "Neorealism and Neoliberalism." *World Politics* 40 (January 1988): 235–51.
- Powell, Robert. "Anarchy in International Relations Theory: The Neorealist–Neoliberal Debate." *International Organization* 48 (Spring 1994): 313–44.
- Ruggie, John Gerard. "Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity: Toward a Neorealist Synthesis." *World Politics* 35 (January 1983): 261–85.
- Sebenius, James K. "Negotiation Analysis." In *International Negotiations: Analysis, Approaches, Issues*, edited by Victor A. Kremenjuk, 65–77. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991.
- Waltz, Kenneth N. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979.
- Zacher, Mark W., and Richard A. Matthew. "Liberal International Theory: Common Threads, Divergent Strands." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, IL., September, 1992.

# Is anybody not an (international relations) liberal?

*Brian C. Rathbun*

From: *Security Studies* 19, no. 1 (2010): 2–25.

International relations scholars have grown increasingly introspective in recent years, undertaking numerous efforts to clean up the alleged sloppiness of the various perspectives that guide their research. More than the other subfields in political science, international relations scholars have relied on distinct points of view—variously called paradigms, research programs, or research traditions—to derive hypotheses and explain politics. Most notably, Jeffrey Legro, Andrew Moravcsik and John Vasquez criticize the growing incoherence and indistinctiveness of realism, the oldest and most dominant approach to international relations theory.<sup>1</sup> Yet liberalism, the traditional counterpart to realism in international relations theory, has largely escaped such scrutiny, despite a recent attempt to establish its social scientific credentials as a rigorously defined alternative.<sup>2</sup>

The realist–liberal tandem serves as the point of departure for countless undergraduate and graduate textbooks and syllabi as well as books and articles. Based on a survey of over 2700 academics around the world, the Teaching, Research and International Policy Project (TRIP) reports that scholars estimate they devote 19 percent of their introductory international relations courses to teaching liberalism. Realism receives 22 percent of their attention, constructivism only 11 percent. In the United States, 20 percent of scholars surveyed identify themselves as liberals, 21 percent as realists, and 17 percent as constructivists. Academics from across the globe estimate that 28 percent of academic work is liberal in nature, 30 percent realist, and 21 percent constructivist.<sup>3</sup> I have not been able to find an international relations textbook that does not use realism and liberalism as a starting point.<sup>4</sup>

With liberalism having cemented its status as one of the major three paradigms, asking if it has the substantive foundations necessary to be a coherent approach is important. Do we know what it means to be a liberal? Can liberalism serve as the source of hypotheses and help structure debates about key phenomena in international relations? Such an interrogation seems especially merited given that one of the fiercest critics of realism’s coherence, Andrew Moravcsik, is an advocate of the theoretical progressiveness of liberalism.

Liberalism is generally defined in one of two ways, each epistemologically faulty. The first is in terms of the *dependent* variable (the phenomena or event to be explained) as the set of theories and arguments that expect increasing or potentially greater cooperation and progress in international affairs, generally defined in terms of increased peace and prosperity. Second, liberalism is defined in terms of the *units of analysis* as the set of arguments or theories that disaggregates the state into smaller units (whether they be individuals, political parties, or bureaucracies) or sees other nonstate actors (such as transnational advocacy networks of non-governmental organizations) as influential.

The problem with these definitions of liberalism is that they are based on *appropriation*, which is not the proper basis for a paradigm. The first definition has the result of seizing

for liberalism any *independent* variable found important for understanding international cooperation, whether it be international organizations (IOs), technological change, democratic institutions, or economic interdependence. Liberalism defined in this way works back from cooperation and appropriates any factor associated with it as liberal. The second amounts to a claim of ownership equating liberalism with an entire *level of analysis*. By this definition, any argument that incorporates domestic politics is liberal.

Liberalism as it is defined suffers from a kind of gluttony. Any argument that incorporates these elements, which arguably includes the majority if not the predominance of IR scholars, becomes liberal. Therefore, just as we must ask whether anybody is still a realist, it is also important to ask whether anybody is *not* a liberal. The answer, “very few,” reflects poorly on liberalism’s prospects as a self-standing approach . . .

## Two definitions of liberalism

### ***By independent variables by way of the dependent variable: liberalism as any factor promoting cooperation***

In the most comprehensive effort to find the common threads within liberalism, Mark Zacher and Richard Matthew identify a number of central themes, two of which are that international relations is being transformed so as to promote greater freedom and that more peace, prosperity, and justice—with greater international cooperation—is symptomatic of that process.<sup>5</sup> Progress therefore is the outcome liberals expect, and cooperation is the means by which it is achieved.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Robert Keohane writes that liberalism “rests on a belief in at least the possibility of cumulative progress in human affairs” and adopts an “ameliorative view of progress in international affairs [*sic*] . . .”<sup>7</sup>

### ***By level of analysis by way of units of analysis: liberalism as domestic politics and pluralism***

The second way in which liberalism is often defined is through units of analysis. It is based on a more pluralistic notion of the actors in international affairs.<sup>8</sup> Keohane and Doyle stress that this notion of liberalism puts the emphasis on the individual as the unit of analysis and analyzes how institutions aggregate their interests.<sup>9</sup> Liberalism is regarded as a “bottom-up” approach of interest aggregation that disaggregates the state, whether into bureaucracies, parties, or branches of government.<sup>10</sup> It also includes non-state actors at both the domestic and international levels, admitting activists in non-governmental organizations, epistemic communities of technical experts, and international organizations.<sup>11</sup> This definition has the benefits of freeing liberalism from its moorings in the dependent variable of cooperation, what Moravcsik calls liberalism’s “legalist, moralist, and utopian” temptations inherent in the first conception described above.<sup>12</sup>

Most who have taken this path have not argued explicitly that liberalism is a paradigm, so using this as a definition might seem suspect. Recently, however, Moravcsik has offered a framework in this vein. In a threefold definition, Moravcsik defines liberalism as arguments in which individuals collect in groups competing for access to domestic institutions. Variation in the latter determines access to the levers of state power and the implementation of favored policies as the national interest. International outcomes reflect the configuration of these states’ preferences, all of which are formed through the same bottom-up process. In sum, individuals matter; domestic institutions matter; and state preferences matter . . .<sup>13</sup>

## **Inappropriate appropriation: liberalism's unjustified monopolies**

### ***Monopoly over independent variables***

Liberalism does not have a core logic and is defined instead through appropriation. This is true of both understandings of the approach. The first definition, liberalism as optimism about cooperation and progress, is essentially a hodgepodge collection of otherwise unrelated independent variables associated with increased international cooperation. Individually, these liberal arguments carefully specify mechanisms and internal logic. But as fruitful and useful as these research avenues have been, the only link among them is that they arguably push toward greater peace and cooperation in international relations. They might not contradict one another, but there is no real positive connection either. That lack of connection is an indictment not of the work but of the categorization. The fact that the more sophisticated "liberals" do indeed see both the potential for cooperation and conflict indicates the very problem itself: liberalism does not have a core logic.

To the extent that liberalism expects cooperation, it must do so on the basis of a series of interdependent propositions about the nature of international reality. Cooperation is an outcome that might perhaps be an expectation based on logic but is not itself a logic. This notion of liberalism works backwards from cooperation rather than moving forward from some understanding of what drives international politics.

As Peter Wilson writes, "There does not seem to be anything tying these ideas together which might constitute the core of a 'doctrine,' 'approach', or 'tradition.'" Only "one common factor does become apparent: all of these ideas, beliefs, and proposals presuppose that conscious, progressive change is possible in international relations."<sup>14</sup> Keohane notes that the variants of liberalism mentioned above, while they are "not inconsistent with one another," they are "logically distinct."<sup>15</sup> Wilson writes of a "tendency to equate . . . idealism with a range of not necessarily compatible things," such as a belief in progress, collective security, international law, and interdependence.<sup>16</sup> Jennifer Sterling-Folker argues that the systemic and domestic forms of liberalism actually contradict one another . . .<sup>17</sup>

### ***Monopoly over levels of analysis***

The problem with this definition of liberalism as pluralistic politics is that the levels of analysis are a categorical schema, not the theoretical basis of a paradigm.<sup>18</sup> How an argument is placed is a reflection of its logic; the level of analysis itself is not the paradigm. The same argument advanced earlier about independent variables applies equally well here. To the extent that paradigms operate at the systemic, domestic, or individual level, it is a result of principles deduced from the core logic of the theory, not an assertion to ownership. Defenders of this notion of liberalism might simply claim that liberalism amounts to a focus on individuals as its units of analysis. The specification of units of analysis, however, does not make a coherent paradigm. Even neorealists must utilize individuals as actors if only to show that the systemic pressures they share with others mean they ultimately act in concert with others.

As noted above, Moravcsik's is the most prominent, explicit, and rigorous statement of liberalism of this kind. Recognizing the error of defining liberalism as cooperative and progressive forces in international relations, Moravcsik makes the attempt to put liberalism on a sounder basis.<sup>19</sup> Moravcsik separates his notion of liberalism from approaches linked only to certain independent variables, such as neoliberal institutionalism.<sup>20</sup> He also explicitly

argues that his notion of liberalism can explain both conflict and cooperation and applies to both international political economy and security outcomes.<sup>21</sup> Moravcsik's effort to highlight the importance of preferences should be applauded. Too often IR scholars, in a bid for generalizability, neglect and simply assume constant preferences. This is so often not the case in international relations, and the result can be poor theory.

Yet the alternative Moravcsik offers is even more brazenly appropriative. Although his solution is not to seize a certain part of the spectrum of dependent variables for liberalism, the solution ends up equating to an appropriation of even more of the spectrum of independent variables. Under his definition, liberalism is no longer tied together by the possibility of cooperative outcomes but now includes any instance in which the preferences of individuals or groups or domestic institutions matter. Moravcsik's notion of liberalism automatically would make liberal any argument that disaggregates the state into institutions and individuals competing for control and access, and thereby any argument taking domestic politics seriously as a force in international relations.

The flaws in Moravcsik's definition are evident in what he tries to claim for liberalism as well as what he arbitrarily excludes. Because he does not identify a core logic, he ends up incorporating elements of distinctly different logics. His liberalism incorporates both a rationalist, utilitarian logic and a constructivist, appropriateness logic. While these are potentially complementary, even the most optimistic scholars see these two paradigms as operating side by side in a kind of division of labor, not as capable of true synthesis.<sup>22</sup> However, Moravcsik is only interested in them if they operate at the domestic level of analysis. For instance, domestic norms show the importance of the liberal paradigm whereas global norms do not. Moravcsik subsumes two distinct logics but cuts each in half. This is an arbitrary distinction that truncates constructivism on the basis of the level of analysis and is indicative of an effort to claim all of domestic politics for liberalism based on an appropriation of the level of analysis and not logic . . .

### **Missing the trees for the forest: separating rationalist and constructivist logics in liberalism**

These two major flaws of liberalism make it difficult to establish who is *not* a liberal. Any scholar who utilizes domestic factors in his explanation or focuses on how IOs, democracy, or interdependence might create more peaceful relations among states becomes a liberal. Not only might this include the vast majority of international relations scholars, this inappropriate label obscures important differences in how many use the domestic level of analysis or these independent variables to build arguments, particularly rationalists and constructivists. The fact that these two approaches rest on very different (albeit potentially complementary) logics of explanation, yet are each hard to distinguish from liberalism, speaks to liberalism's problem . . .

### **Notes**

- 1 Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" *International Security* 24, no. 2 (1999): 5–55; John A. Vasquez, "The Realist Paradigm and Degenerative versus Progressive Research Programs: An Appraisal of Neotraditional Research on Waltz's Balancing Proposition," *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (1997): 899–912.
- 2 Andrew Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics," *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997): 513–53.
- 3 Richard Jordan, Daniel Maliniak, Amy Oakes, Susan Peterson, and Michael J. Tierney, "One



- Discipline or Many? TRIP Survey of International Relations Faculty in Ten Countries" (Williamsburg, VA: Institute for the Theory and Practice of International Relations at the College of William and Mary, February 2009), [http://irtheoryandpractice.wm.edu/projects/trip/Final\\_Trip\\_Report\\_2009.pdf](http://irtheoryandpractice.wm.edu/projects/trip/Final_Trip_Report_2009.pdf).
- 4 See, for example, John Baylis and Steve Smith, *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Joshua Goldstein, *International Relations* (New York: Pearson, 2004); Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Understanding International Conflict: An Introduction to Theory and History* (New York: Longman, 2003); Alan C. Lamborn and Joseph Leggold, *World Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003).
- 5 Mark Zacher and Richard Matthew, "Liberal International Relations Theory: Common Threads, Divergent Strands," in *Controversies in International Relations Theory*, ed. Charles Kegley (New York: St. Martin's, 1995), 107–50, 109–11.
- 6 David Baldwin, "Neoliberals, Neorealism, and World Politics," in *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate*, ed. David Baldwin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 1–28; Arthur A. Stein, *Why Nations Cooperate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).
- 7 Robert O. Keohane, "Neoliberal Institutionalism: A Perspective on World Politics," in *International Institutions and State Power* (Boulder: Westview, 1989), 1–20, 10; Robert O. Keohane, "International Liberalism Reconsidered," in *The Economic Limits to Modern Politics*, ed. John Dunn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 165–94, 174.
- 8 Peter J. Katzenstein, Robert O. Keohane, and Stephen D. Krasner, "International Organization and the Study of World Politics," *International Organization* 54, no. 4 (1998): 645–85.
- 9 Keohane, "Neoliberal Institutionalism," 174; Keohane, "International Liberalism Reconsidered"; Michael Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace: Realism, Liberalism and Socialism* (New York: Norton, 1997), 208–12.
- 10 Joseph M. Grieco, "Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism," *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (1998): 485–507; Thomas Risse-Kappen, *Cooperation and Nations: The European Influence on U.S. Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 25; Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 12, 31, 249; Keohane, "International Liberalism Reconsidered," 174; Stein, *Why Nations Cooperate*, 9.
- 11 Haas, "Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination"; Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Transnational Relations and World Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972); Katzenstein et al., "International Organization and the Study of World Politics."
- 12 Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously."
- 13 Ibid., 516–21.
- 14 Peter Wilson, "Twenty Years' Crisis and the Category of 'Idealism' in International Relations," in *Thinkers of the Twenty Years' Crisis: Inter-War Idealism Reassessed*, ed. David Long and Peter Wilson (New York: Clarendon Press, 1995), 13.
- 15 Keohane, "International Liberalism Reconsidered," 175–76.
- 16 Wilson, "The Twenty Years' Crisis," 8.
- 17 Jennifer Sterling-Folker, "Realist Environment, Liberal Process and Domestic-Level Variables," *International Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1997): 1–25.
- 18 J. David Singer, "The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations," *World Politics* 14, no. 1 (1961): 77–92.
- 19 Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously," 516–21.
- 20 Ibid., 536.
- 21 Ibid., 533.
- 22 James Fearon and Alexander Wendt, "Rationalism vs. Constructivism: A Skeptical View," in *Handbook of International Relations*, ed. Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse-Kappen, and Beth Simmons (London: Sage, 2002).

# How liberalism produces democratic peace

*John M. Owen*

From: *International Security* 19, no. 2 (Fall 1994): 87–125.

The proposition that democracies seldom if ever go to war against one another has nearly become a truism. The “democratic peace” has attracted attention for a number of reasons. It is “the closest thing we have to an empirical law in the study of international relations,” reports one scholar.<sup>1</sup> It poses an apparent anomaly to realism, the dominant school of security studies. And it has become an axiom of U.S. foreign policy. “Democracies don’t attack each other,” President Clinton declared in his 1994 State of the Union address, meaning that “ultimately the best strategy to insure our security and to build a durable peace is to support the advance of democracy elsewhere.” Clinton has called democratization the “third pillar” of his foreign policy.<sup>2</sup>

The democratic peace proposition is vulnerable in at least three ways, however. First, it contains two inherent ambiguities: How does one define democracy? What counts as a war? The slipperiness of these terms provides a temptation to tautology: to define them so as to safeguard the proposition. Indeed, some challengers to the proposition claim that democracies have been at war with each other several times.<sup>3</sup> A second challenge is that the lack of wars among democracies, even if true, is not surprising. Wars are so rare that random chance could account for the democratic peace, much as it could account for an absence of war among, say, states whose names begin with the letter K.<sup>4</sup> A third critique points out that the democratic peace lacks a convincing theoretical foundation. No one is sure why democracies do not fight one another and yet do fight non-democracies.<sup>5</sup> That we do not really know the causal mechanism behind the democratic peace means we cannot be certain the peace is genuine. It may be an epiphenomenon, a by-product of other causal variables such as those suggested by realist theories of international politics.<sup>6</sup>

In this article I defend the democratic peace proposition by attempting to remedy the last problem. I do not rebut the argument that the proposition is tautological, although it is worth noting that most democratic peace theorists are meticulous in their definitions, and that their critics are also susceptible to the tautological temptation. I also leave aside the “random chance” argument, except to point out with its proponents that democracies also appear more likely to align with one another. Rather, I argue that liberal ideas cause liberal democracies to tend away from war with one another, and that the same ideas prod these states into war with illiberal states . . .

I define a liberal democracy as a state that instantiates liberal ideas, one where liberalism is the dominant ideology and citizens have leverage over war decisions. That is, liberal democracies are those states with a visible liberal presence, and that feature free speech and regular competitive elections of the officials empowered to declare war. I argue that liberal ideology and institutions work in tandem to bring about democratic peace. Liberals believe that individuals everywhere are fundamentally the same, and are best off pursuing

self-preservation and material well-being. Freedom is required for these pursuits, and peace is required for freedom; coercion and violence are counter-productive. Thus all individuals share an interest in peace, and should want war only as an instrument to bring about peace. Liberals believe that democracies seek their citizens' true interests and that thus by definition they are pacific and trustworthy. Non-democracies may be dangerous because they seek other ends, such as conquest or plunder. Liberals thus hold that the national interest calls for accommodation of fellow democracies, but sometimes calls for war with non-democracies.

When liberals run the government, relations with fellow democracies are harmonious. When illiberals govern, relations may be rockier. Even then, if war is threatened with a state that the liberal opposition considers a fellow democracy, liberals agitate to prevent hostilities using the free speech allowed them by law. Illiberal leaders are unable to rally the public to fight, and fear that an unpopular war would lead to their ouster at the next election. On the other hand, if the crisis is with a state believed to be a non-democracy, the leaders may be pushed toward war . . .

### **Liberalism as the cause of democratic peace**

Liberal ideas are the source—the independent variable—behind the distinctive foreign policies of liberal democracies. These ideas give rise to two intervening variables, liberal ideology and domestic democratic institutions, which shape foreign policy. Liberal ideology prohibits war against liberal democracies, but sometimes calls for war against illiberal states. Democratic institutions allow these drives to affect foreign policy and international relations.<sup>7</sup>

#### ***Liberal ideas***

Liberalism is universalistic and tolerant. Liberal political theory, such as that of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant, typically begins with abstract man in a state of nature in which he is equal to all other men. Although beliefs and cultures may differ, liberalism says, all persons share a fundamental interest in self-preservation and material well-being.<sup>8</sup> There is thus a harmony of interests among all individuals. To realize this harmony, each individual must be allowed to follow his or her own preferences as long as they do not detract from another's freedom. People thus need to cooperate by tolerating one another and forgoing coercion and violence.<sup>9</sup> Since true interests harmonize, the more people are free, the better off all are. Liberalism is cosmopolitan, positing that all persons, not just certain subjects of one's own state, should be free. The spread of liberalism need not be motivated by altruism. It is entirely in the individual's self-interest to cooperate.<sup>10</sup> In sum, liberalism's ends are life and property, and its means are liberty and toleration.

Liberals believe that not all persons or nations are free, however. Two things are needed for freedom. First, persons or nations must be themselves enlightened, aware of their interests and how they should be secured.<sup>11</sup> Second, people must live under enlightened political institutions which allow their true interests to shape politics.<sup>12</sup> Liberals disagree over which political institutions are enlightened. Kant stressed a strict separation of the executive from the legislative power.<sup>13</sup> For most Americans in the nineteenth century, only republics (non monarchies) were "democracies" or "free countries."<sup>14</sup> Today, Westerners tend to trust states that allow meaningful political competition. Central to all these criteria is the requirement that the people have some leverage over their rulers. That is, nineteenth-century republics

and today's liberal democracies share the essential liberal goal of preventing tyranny over individual freedom.

### *Liberal foreign policy ideology*

Liberalism gives rise to an ideology that distinguishes states primarily according to regime type: in assessing a state, liberalism first asks whether it is a liberal democracy or not.<sup>15</sup> This is in contrast to neorealism, which distinguishes states according to capabilities. Liberalism, in looking to characteristics other than power, is similar to most other systems of international thought, including communism, fascism, and monarchism.<sup>16</sup>

Liberalism is, however, more tolerant of its own kind than these other systems. Once liberals accept a foreign state as a liberal democracy, they adamantly oppose war against that state. The rationale follows from liberal premises. *Ceteris paribus*, people are better off without war, because it is costly and dangerous. War is called for only when it would serve liberal ends—i.e., when it would most likely enhance self-preservation and well-being. This can only be the case when the adversary is not a liberal democracy. Liberal democracies are believed reasonable, predictable, and trustworthy, because they are governed by their citizens' true interests, which harmonize with all individuals' true interests around the world. Liberals believe that they understand the intentions of foreign liberal democracies, and that those intentions are always pacific toward fellow liberal democracies. Again, it is not necessary that liberals be motivated by justice, only by selfinterest.<sup>17</sup>

Illiberal states, on the other hand, are viewed *prima facie* as unreasonable, unpredictable, and potentially dangerous. These are states either ruled by despots, or with unenlightened citizenries. Illiberal states may seek illiberal ends such as conquest, intolerance, or impoverishment of others. Liberal democracies do not automatically fight all illiberal states in an endless crusade to spread freedom, however. Usually, they estimate that the costs of liberalizing another state are too high, often because the illiberal state is too powerful.<sup>18</sup> Liberal democracies do not fully escape the imperatives of power politics.

*The importance of perceptions.* That a state has enlightened citizens and liberal-democratic institutions, however, is not sufficient for it to belong to the democratic peace: if its peer states do not believe it is a liberal democracy, they will not treat it as one. History shows many cases where perceptions tripped up democratic peace. For example, as Christopher Layne demonstrates, the French after World War I did not consider Germany a fellow liberal democracy, even though Germans were governed under the liberal Weimar constitution. The salient fact about Germany, in the French view of 1923, was not that it had a liberal constitution, but that it was peopled by Germans, who had recently proven themselves most unenlightened and were now renegeing on reparations agreements.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, for the liberal mechanism to prevent a liberal democracy from going to war against a foreign state, liberals must consider the foreign state a liberal democracy. Most explanations of democratic peace posit that democracies recognize one another and refuse to fight on that basis; but the researchers never test this assumption.<sup>20</sup> In fact, often it does not hold. The refusal to take this into account keeps the democratic peace literature from understanding apparent exceptions to democratic peace, such as the War of 1812, the American Civil War, and the Spanish-American War.<sup>21</sup> My argument explains these apparent exceptions. . . . [M]ost Americans did not consider England democratic in 1812 because England was a monarchy. In 1861, Southern slavery prevented liberals in the Union from considering the Confederacy a liberal democracy.<sup>22</sup> Almost no Americans considered Spain a democracy in 1898. To determine which states belong to the pacific union, we must do

more than simply examine their constitutions. We must examine how the liberals themselves define democracy . . .

### ***Democratic institutions***

The domestic structures that translate liberal preferences into foreign policy are likewise a product of liberal ideas. Liberalism seeks to actualize the harmony of interests among individuals by insuring that the freedom of each is compatible with the freedom of all. It thus calls for structures that protect the right of each citizen to self-government. Most important for our purposes are those giving citizens leverage over governmental decision makers. Freedom of speech is necessary because it allows citizens to evaluate alternative foreign policies. Regular, competitive elections are necessary because they provide citizens with the possibility of punishing officials who violate their rights. Liberalism says that the people who fight and fund war have the right to be consulted, through representatives they elect, before entering it.<sup>23</sup>

*Democratic institutions.* When those who govern hold the liberal ideology prohibiting war against fellow liberal democracies, then the role of democratic institutions is limited simply to putting these liberals in office. Liberal American presidents have included Thomas Jefferson and Woodrow Wilson. These men sought to implement liberal foreign policies, including harmonious relations with those states they considered liberal and confrontation with those they considered illiberal.

Not everyone in every liberal democracy, however, necessarily holds the liberal ideology. Some may instead be political realists, who view power as more important than freedom. Some others may simply want good relations with economic partners, regardless of regime type.<sup>24</sup> When such illiberals govern liberal democracies, they may lead the nation into disputes with fellow liberal democracies. They can do so because the general public pays little attention to everyday foreign policy.

*Elites and everyday foreign policy.* Day-to-day foreign policy is mostly the province of elites. Ordinary citizens have good reason for ignoring relations with other nations. Since relations with most nations have little perceptible impact on the individual citizen, the expected payoff to each is not worth the time investment.<sup>25</sup> This collective-action problem means that normal foreign policy is delegated to representatives.

In making everyday foreign policy, the main domestic influences on these representatives are elites. Together, representatives and elites form what James Rosenau calls *opinion leaders*: people “who occupy positions which enable them regularly to transmit, either locally or nationally, opinions about any issue to unknown persons outside of their occupational field or about more than one class of issues to unknown professional colleagues.” They include “government officials, prominent businessmen, civil servants, journalists, scholars, heads of professional associations, and interest groups.”<sup>26</sup> In liberal democracies, these include staunch liberals who always desire to see good relations with fellow liberal democracies, and often desire confrontation with those states they consider illiberal. Without the leverage provided by public attention, the liberal elite has no special advantage over other elites, such as special interests.<sup>27</sup> The state may thereby fall into a crisis with a fellow liberal democracy.

*When war is threatened: liberal elites and the public.* At the point where war is threatened, however, it becomes in the interest of each citizen to pay attention. War costs blood and treasure, and these high costs are felt throughout society. It also requires public mobilization. Those statesmen and elites who want war must persuade public opinion that war is necessary. In democracies, this persuasion typically includes arguments that the adversary state is not

democratic. When the prior liberal consensus is that the adversary *is* a liberal democracy, however, these illiberal statesmen find that they cannot mobilize the public.

This is in part because they face strong opposition from liberal opinion leaders. Using the tools allowed them by domestic institutions—the media, public speeches, rallies, and so on—liberal elites agitate against war with fellow liberal democracies. They prevent illiberal elites from persuading the public that war is necessary.<sup>28</sup> Illiberal statesmen find that war with a liberal democracy would be extremely unpopular. Moreover, they begin to fear electoral ouster if they go to war against a fellow liberal democracy. Even illiberal statesmen are then compelled to act as liberals and resolve the crisis peacefully.<sup>29</sup>

Alternatively, there may be times when liberals desire war with an illiberal state, yet illiberal statesmen oppose such a war. Using the same institutions of free discussion and the threat of electoral punishment, liberals may force their leaders into war. Such was the case in the Spanish-American War.<sup>30</sup>

This part of my argument conforms to recent research on public opinion and foreign policy, which indicates a dialectic among elites, the general public, and policy makers. A number of studies indicate that opinion changes precede policy changes, suggesting that the former cause the latter rather than vice versa.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, a recent work finds that in the 1970s and 1980s the greatest influences on aggregate shifts in U.S. public opinion were television news commentators and experts. For example, television commentators' statements on crises in Vietnam in 1969 and the Middle East in 1974–75 and 1977–78 evidently swayed public opinion. Often these media commentators opposed official governmental policy.<sup>32</sup> Together, these findings suggest that, at least in the United States, an opinion elite at times shapes public positions on issues, thus constraining foreign policy.

Figure 1 illustrates the argument. Liberal ideas form the independent variable. These ideas produce the ideology which prohibits war with fellow liberal democracies and sometimes calls for war with illiberal states. The ideas also give rise to democratic institutions. Working in tandem, the ideology and institutions push liberal democracies toward democratic peace.

### **... Democratic peace and the realist challenge: the liberal response**

Many realists have declared democratic peace a fantasy. Permanent peace between mutually recognized liberal democracies, they argue, is not possible. Liberal states, like all others, must base foreign policy on the imperatives of power politics. Some realists argue that there is no theoretically compelling causal mechanism that could explain democratic peace. Others claim that even if there were, the foreign policy processes of democracies show that such a "mechanism" is empirically impotent.<sup>33</sup> Realist skeptics make a number of claims:

First, they claim that if neither democratic structures nor norms alone can explain the democratic peace, then there is no democratic peace.<sup>34</sup> I have already pointed out the logical fallacy behind this claim. The structural/normative distinction is epistemological, not ontological. I argue that structure and norms work in tandem: liberal ideas proscribe wars among democracies, and democratic institutions ensure that this proscription is followed.

Realists claim that if there were a democratic peace, then liberal democracies would never make threats against one another.<sup>35</sup> The claim is that the logic of the democratic peace proposition implies that liberal democracies will never try to coerce one another. But of course, there is no inherent "logic" of democratic peace independent of an explicit argument about how it works. My argument answers realism in two ways. First, liberal democracies do



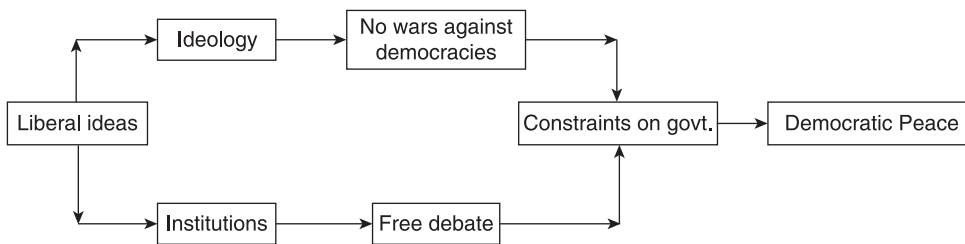


Figure 1 Causal pathways of liberal democratic peace

not always consider each other liberal. What a scholar in 1994 considers democratic is not always what a statesman in 1894 considered democratic. Second, liberal democracies are sometimes governed by illiberal leaders who are somewhat autonomous in implementing foreign policy. Such leaders may make threats; they are simply unable to mobilize the nation for war, due to the constraints of democratic institutions.

Realists claim that if there were democratic peace, then public opinion in liberal democracies would never want war with a fellow liberal democracy.<sup>36</sup> Like the previous claim, this one makes two assumptions: that all citizens of liberal democracies are liberal, and that they agree on which foreign states are also liberal. Neither assumption is true, and neither is necessary for democratic peace to occur. All that is necessary for statesmen to be constrained is that they believe war would be too unpopular. For this, a nation's population need not all be liberal.

Realists claim that when power politics requires war with a democracy, liberals will redefine that state as a despotism; when power politics requires peace with a non-democracy, they will redefine that state as a democracy.<sup>37</sup> That is, ideological labels are sugar-coating to make otherwise bitter policies easier to swallow. Statesmen's public rationales for foreign policy are solely rhetorical; one must look at their confidential statements to understand their true motives. . . . [I]n crises liberals hang fast to the ideological labels they previously gave foreign states. Republicans stood by France after the XYZ Affair. They mistrusted England from the time of the American Revolution up to the end of the War of 1812 (and beyond). Many Americans began to see England as democratic in the 1880s, and continued to do so during the Venezuelan crisis. Britons began admiring the United States well before the rise of Germany "forced" them to make friends in the late 1890s. The one case where liberals changed their opinion of a foreign state during a crisis was in the Civil War. There, British opinion shifted to the Union side after the Emancipation Proclamation. The cause of this shift was not power politics, but the Emancipation Proclamation, which signified that the Union was fighting for abolition, a liberal cause the British had long supported.

Realists claim that "strategic concerns and the relative distribution of military capabilities . . . should crucially—perhaps decisively" affect the outcomes of crises between liberal democracies, and moreover that "broader geopolitical considerations pertaining to a state's position in international politics should, if implicated, account significantly for the crisis's outcome."<sup>38</sup> I do not contest the relevance of power politics to the foreign policies of liberal democracies. These realist hypotheses, however, imply that during a crisis, statesmen will be able either to ignore liberals or to persuade them to change their minds. But liberal ideology and institutions clearly had independent power in 1798, when John Adams could not ask

Congress for war against France due to staunch Republican opposition. In 1862, Palmerston privately admitted to being constrained by pro-Union opinion from intervening in the Civil War. Realism would and did counsel the British to work to keep the United States divided and weak, but they passed up the opportunity . . .

Realists claim that Wilhelmine Germany was a democracy, and therefore democracies fought one another in World War I.<sup>39</sup> There is not the space to address this claim fully, but two things may briefly be said. First, even before the war, most British and Americans saw Germany as undemocratic. The British abhorred German ideology, and although many Americans admired Germany's progressive social policies, most viewed the country as politically backward. "Germany is mediaeval," said one magazine in 1912. "'Divine Rights' is written on the brow of the Kaiser. . . . This is the trinity that rules Germany: a mediæval king, a feudal aristocracy, and the pushing parvenus of coal dust and iron filings."<sup>40</sup> Second, the chancellor was responsible to the Emperor William rather than the legislature. The electorate had little leverage over war decisions. The press was not wholly free, as illustrated when William suppressed an antiwar book in 1913. The emperor also controlled the upper chamber of the legislature, the Bundesrat, which had veto power over the legislation of the lower house.<sup>41</sup> Thus, by neither the standards of its time nor those of this study can Germany be called a liberal democracy in 1914 . . .

## Notes

- 1 Jack S. Levy, "Domestic Politics and War," in Robert I. Rotberg and Theodore K. Rabb, *The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 88. See also Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 3–23; and James Lee Ray, "Wars between Democracies: Rare or Nonexistent?" *International Interactions*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Spring 1988), pp. 251–276.
- 2 "Excerpts from President Clinton's State of the Union Message," *New York Times*, January 26, 1994, p. A17; "The Clinton Administration Begins," *Foreign Policy Bulletin*, Vol. 3, No. 4/5 (January–April 1993), p. 5.
- 3 See for example Christopher Layne, "Kant or Cant: The Myth of the Democratic Peace," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Fall 1994), pp. 5–49; Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Fall 1993), p. 78; Jack Vincent, "Freedom and International Conflict: Another Look," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (March 1987), pp. 102–112; and Henry S. Farber and Joanne Gowa, "Politics and Peace," unpublished manuscript, Princeton University, January 11, 1994. Claiming that democracies have never fought one another is Ray, "Wars between Democracies."
- 4 David Spiro, "The Insignificance of the Liberal Peace," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Fall 1994), pp. 50–86; John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Summer 1990), p. 50. Spiro does not believe random chance accounts for war; he also argues that liberal states do tend to align with one another.
- 5 Melvin Small and J. David Singer, "The War-proneness of Democratic Regimes," *Jerusalem Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Summer 1976), pp. 50–69. R.J. Rummel maintains that democracies are generally less prone to war. Rummel, "Libertarianism and International Violence," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (March 1983), pp. 27–71.
- 6 Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future," pp. 48–51; Farber and Gowa, "Politics and Peace," pp. 3–8. See also Michael Desch, "War and State Formation, Peace and State Deformation?" unpublished manuscript, Olin Institute for Strategic Studies, Harvard University, November 1993.
- 7 See Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 13–17. See also Spiro, "Insignificance," for the importance of liberal conceptions of national interest.
- 8 John Locke, for example, writes: "The great and chief end therefore, of Mens uniting into Commonwealths, and putting themselves under Government, is the Preservation of their Property." Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, chap. 9, para. 124. Locke says "property" includes one's

- "Life, Liberty, and Estate"; *ibid.*, chap. 7, para. 87. In Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 350–351, 323.
- 9 Immanuel Kant, who deduced a zone of peace among republics in the 1790s, argues that over time, the devastation of conflict teaches them that it is best to cooperate with others so as to realize their full capacities. See for example Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent," in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), pp. 31–34. See also Locke, *Second Treatise*, chap. 2, para. 5, p. 270. By "harmony," I do not imply that uncoordinated selfish action by each automatically results in all being better off (a "natural" harmony). All individuals are interested in peace, but enlightenment, the right institutions, and cooperation are necessary to bring peace about. On the distinction between uncoordinated harmony and cooperation, see Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 49–64.
  - 10 Kant says a republic is possible "even for a people comprised of devils (if only they possess understanding)." Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, p. 124. See also Alexis de Tocqueville, "How the Americans Combat Individualism by the Doctrine of Self-interest Properly Understood," *Democracy in America*, ed. J.P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), part 2, chap. 8, pp. 525–528.
  - 11 See Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" in Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, pp. 41–48.
  - 12 For a brief history of the view that selfish rulers rather than ordinary people are responsible for war, see Michael Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1978), pp. 14–18.
  - 13 Kant, "Perpetual Peace," pp. 112–115. Kant calls such states "republics," but by his definition monarchies may be republics.
  - 14 See for example David M. Fitzsimons, "Tom Paine's New World Order: Idealistic Internationalism in the Ideology of Early American Foreign Relations," unpublished manuscript, University of Michigan, 1994.
  - 15 I have benefited from conversations with Sean Lynn-Jones on many of these points. For an attempt to reformulate liberal international relations theory based on distinctions among domestic political orders, see Andrew Moravcsik, "Liberalism and International Relations Theory," Working Paper, Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, 1992.
  - 16 Traditional realists such as E.H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau, ancient Greeks, medieval Muslims, and communists all see state-level distinctions as important. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis* (London: Macmillan, 1946), p. 236; Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 3d ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), p. 131; Sohail Hashmi, "The Sixth Pillar: Jihad and the Ethics of War and Peace in Islam," Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1994; Robert Jervis, "Hypotheses on Misperception," *World Politics*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (April 1968), p. 467.
  - 17 Here my argument differs from that of Michael Doyle, who writes that "domestically just republics, which rest on consent, presume foreign republics to be also consensual, just, and therefore deserving of accommodation." Michael Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs, Part I," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Summer 1983), p. 230.
  - 18 Compare this with the Union's attitude toward Britain in the Civil War, described below. For explanations that see democratic prudence as more central to the democratic peace, see Randall L. Schweller, "Domestic Structure and Preventive War: Are Democracies More Pacific?" *World Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (January 1992), pp. 235–269; and David A. Lake, "Powerful Pacifists: Democratic States and War," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 86, No. 1 (March 1992), pp. 24–37.
  - 19 See Layne, "The Myth of the Democratic Peace." More research needs to be done on the question of how a state with democratic institutions comes to be regarded by its peers as liberal.
  - 20 For example, Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman assert: "The presence of the constraint is not alone sufficient to ensure cooperation or harmony. However, it is common knowledge whether a given state is a liberal democracy." In *War and Reason: Domestic and International Imperatives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 156. The same assumption is used (less explicitly) by Doyle, "Liberalism and World Politics"; Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace*; Ray, "Wars between Democracies"; Lake, "Powerful Pacifists"; Schweller, "Domestic Structure and Preventive War"; and Rummel, "Libertarianism and International Violence."

- 21 Kenneth Waltz asserts that the War of 1812 and the Civil War were fought between democracies; Waltz, "Emerging Structure," p. 78. David Lake, who argues for the democratic peace proposition, calls the Spanish-American War a war between democracies. Lake, "Powerful Pacifists," p. 33.
- 22 As the nineteenth century reached its midpoint, slavery came to be seen by such Southern figures as John C. Calhoun as "the most safe and stable basis for free institutions in the world." It mattered a great deal to Northerners that the South was illiberal. Thus the *New York Tribune* in 1855 could write: "We are not one people. We are two peoples. We are a people for Freedom and a people for Slavery. Between the two, conflict is inevitable." See Eric Foner, *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 40–41, 52–53.
- 23 "If . . . the consent of the citizenry is required in order to determine whether or not there will be war, it is natural that they consider all its calamities before committing themselves to so risky a game." Kant, "Perpetual Peace," p. 113.
- 24 An explanation of why not everyone in a regime necessarily holds the dominant ideology is beyond the scope of this article. Here I simply take it as empirically obvious that not all citizens of liberal democracies are liberal, just as not all citizens of communist states are communist.
- 25 This reasoning follows that of Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), pp. 207–276.
- 26 James Rosenau, *Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: An Operational Formulation* (New York: Random House, 1961), pp. 35–39; Michael Leigh, *Mobilizing Consent: Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy, 1937–1947* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976), pp. 4–5.
- 27 For a theory of how special interests can "hijack" foreign policy, see Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 31–55.
- 28 On the importance of free speech to democratic peace, see Stephen Van Evera, "Primed for Peace: Europe After the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Winter 1990/91), p. 27.
- 29 Works that have used the assumption that elected officials value re-election above all else include Downs, *Economic Theory*; and David R. Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).
- 30 See John L. Offner, *An Unwanted War: The Diplomacy of the United States and Spain over Cuba, 1895–1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).
- 31 For a summary, see Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro, "Studying Substantive Democracy," *PS*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (March 1994), pp. 9–10.
- 32 Popular presidents had strong effects, while unpopular ones had little effect. Interestingly, special interest groups usually caused public opinion to move in a *contrary* direction. Benjamin I. Page, Robert Y. Shapiro, and Glenn R. Dempsey, "What Moves Public Opinion," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 81, No. 1 (March 1987), pp. 23–43.
- 33 See Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future"; Waltz, "Emerging Structure"; Layne, "The Myth of the Democratic Peace"; Farber and Gowa, "Politics and Peace."
- 34 Layne, "Kant or Cant."
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 This is implied in Hans Morgenthau's argument that Woodrow Wilson led the United States into World War I "not to make the world safe for democracy," but because "Germany threatened the balance of power. . . . Wilson pursued the right policy, but he pursued it for the wrong reason." Hans J. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest* (New York: Knopf, 1951), pp. 25–26.
- 38 Layne, "Kant or Cant."
- 39 Layne, "The Myth of the Democratic Peace."
- 40 *World's Work*, June 1912, p. 146.
- 41 John L. Snell, *The Democratic Movement in Germany, 1789–1914* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976), pp. 165, 212–219, 237–238, 343, 366; *Literary Digest*, June 14, 1913, pp. 1332–1333. For an argument that the German political system contributed to the coming of war, see Paul Kennedy, "The Kaiser and German *Weltpolitik*," in J. Rohl and N. Sombert, eds., *Kaiser Wilhelm II: New Interpretations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 143–168.

# Kant or cant

## The myth of the democratic peace

*Christopher Layne*

From: *International Security* 19, no. 2 (Fall 1994): 5–49.

The theory of the “Democratic Peace” raises important theoretical issues:<sup>1</sup> the contention that democratic states behave differently toward each other than toward nondemocracies cuts to the heart of the international relations theory debate about the relative salience of second-image (domestic politics) and of third-image (systemic structure) explanations of international political outcomes. Democratic peace theory has also come to have a real-world importance as well: Policymakers who have embraced democratic peace theory see a crucial link between America’s security and the spread of democracy, which is viewed as the antidote that will prevent future wars. Indeed some democratic peace theorists, notably Bruce Russett, believe that in an international system comprising a critical mass of democratic states, “It may be possible in part to supersede the ‘realist’ principles (anarchy, the security dilemma of states) that have dominated practice to the exclusion of ‘liberal’ or ‘idealist’ ones since at least the seventeenth century.”<sup>2</sup> Because of its theoretical claims and policy implications, the democratic peace theory merits careful examination . . .<sup>3</sup>

### **The case for a democratic peace: its claims and its logic**

Democratic peace theory does not contend that democratic states are less war-prone than non-democracies; they are not. The theory does, however, make two important claims, first, that democracies never (or rarely; there is a good deal of variation about this) go to war with other democracies.<sup>4</sup> As Jack S. Levy observes, the “absence of war between democracies comes as close as anything we have to an empirical law in international relations.”<sup>5</sup> Second, when democracies come into conflict with one another, they only rarely threaten to use force, because it is “illegitimate” to do so.<sup>6</sup> Democratic peace theory explicitly holds that it is the very nature of democratic political systems that accounts for the fact that democracies do not fight or threaten other democracies . . .

### **Testing democratic peace theory**

. . . Democratic peace theory not only predicts a specific outcome—no war between democracies—but also purports to explain why that outcome will occur. It is thus suited to being tested by the case study method, a detailed look at a small number of examples to determine if events unfold and actors act as the theory predicts. The case study method also affords the opportunity to test the competing explanations of international political outcomes offered by democratic peace theory and by realism. To test the robustness of democratic peace theory’s causal logic, the focus here is on “near misses,” specific cases in which democratic states had both opportunity and reason to fight each other, but did not . . .



Democratic peace theory, if valid, should account powerfully for the fact that serious crises between democratic states ended in near misses rather than in war. If democratic norms and culture explain the democratic peace, in a near-war crisis, certain indicators of the democratic peace theory should be in evidence: First, public opinion should be strongly pacific. Public opinion is important not because it is an institutional constraint, but because it is an indirect measure of the mutual respect that democracies are said to have for each other. Second, policymaking elites should refrain from making military threats against other democracies and should refrain from making preparations to carry out threats. Democratic peace theorists waffle on this point by suggesting that the absence of war between democracies is more important than the absence of threats. But this sets the threshold of proof too low. Because the crux of the theory is that democracies externalize their internal norms of peaceful dispute resolution, then especially in a crisis, one should not see democracies threatening other democracies. And if threats are made, they should be a last-resort option rather than an early one. Third, democracies should bend over backwards to accommodate each other in a crisis. Ultimata, unbending hard lines, and big-stick diplomacy are the stuff of *Realpolitik*, not the democratic peace.

A realist explanation of near misses would look at a very different set of indicators. First, realism postulates a ratio of national interest to democratic respect: in a crisis, the more important the interests a democracy perceives to be at stake, the more likely that its policy will be shaped by realist imperatives rather than by democratic norms and culture. When vital interests are on the line, democracies should not be inhibited from using threats, ultimata, and big-stick diplomacy against another democracy. Second, even in a crisis involving democracies, states should be very attentive to strategic concerns, and the relative distribution of military capabilities between them should crucially—perhaps decisively—affect their diplomacy. Third, broader geopolitical considerations pertaining to a state's position in international politics should, if implicated, account significantly for the crisis's outcome. Key here is what Geoffrey Blainey calls the “fighting waterbirds’ dilemma,” involving concerns that others watching from the sidelines will take advantage of a state's involvement in war; that war will leave a state weakened and in an inferior relative power position *vis-à-vis* possible future rivals; and that failure to propitiate the opposing state in a crisis will cause it to ally with one's other adversaries or rivals.<sup>7</sup>

I have chosen to study four modern historical instances in which democratic great powers almost came to blows: (1) the United States and Great Britain in 1861 (“the *Trent* affair”); (2) the United States and Great Britain in 1895–96 (the Venezuela crisis); France and Great Britain in 1898 (the Fashoda crisis); and France and Germany in 1923 (the Ruhr crisis) . . .<sup>8</sup>

### *Anglo-American crisis I: The Trent affair, 1861*

In 1861, tensions arising from the War Between the States brought the Union and Britain to the brink of war. The most important causes of Anglo-American friction stemmed from the Northern blockade of Confederate ports and the consequent loss to Britain of the cotton upon which its textile industry depended. The immediate precipitating cause of the Anglo-American crisis, however, was action of the *USS San Jacinto* which, acting without express orders from Washington, intercepted the British mail ship *Trent* on November 8, 1861. The *Trent* was transporting James M. Mason and John Slidell, the Confederacy's commissioners-designate to Great Britain and France; they had boarded the *Trent*, a neutral vessel, in Havana, Cuba, a neutral port. A boarding party from the *San Jacinto*, after searching the



*Trent*, placed Mason and Slidell under arrest. The *Trent* was allowed to complete its voyage while the *San Jacinto* transported Mason and Slidell to Fort Warren in Boston harbor, where they were incarcerated.

When word was received in Britain, the public was overcome with war fever. "The first explosion of the Press, on receipt of the news of the *Trent*, had been a terrific one."<sup>9</sup> An American citizen residing in England reported to Secretary of State William H. Seward, "The people are frantic with rage, and were the country polled I fear 999 men out of 1000 would declare for war."<sup>10</sup> From Edinburgh, another American wrote, "I have never seen so intense a feeling of indignation in my life."<sup>11</sup>

The British government was hardly less bellicose than the public and the press. Fortified by legal opinions holding that Mason and Slidell had been removed from the *Trent* in contravention of international law, the Cabinet adopted a hard-line policy that mirrored the public mood . . .

The Cabinet adopted a dual-track approach towards Washington: London used military threats to coerce the United States into surrendering diplomatically, while on the diplomatic side, Foreign Secretary Lord John Russell drafted a note to the Union government in which, while holding firm to the demand that Mason and Slidell be released, he offered Washington an avenue of graceful retreat by indicating that London would accept, as tantamount to an apology, a declaration that the *San Jacinto* had acted without official sanction. Nevertheless, the note that was actually transmitted to Washington was an ultimatum. Although the British minister in Washington, Lord Lyons, was instructed to present the communication in a fashion calculated to maximize the chances of American compliance, his charge was clear: unless within seven days of receipt the Union government unconditionally accepted Britain's demands, Lyons was to ask for his passports and depart the United States . . .

Driven by the belief that Washington would give in only to the threat of force, London's diplomacy was backed up by ostentatious military and naval preparations. Anticipating a possible conflict, the Cabinet embargoed the export to the United States of saltpeter (November 30) and of arms and ammunition (December 4). Underscoring the gravity of the crisis, for only the fourth time in history the Cabinet created a special war committee to oversee strategic planning and war preparations. Urgent steps were taken to reinforce Britain's naval and military contingents in North America. Beginning in mid-December, a hastily organized sealift increased the number of regular British army troops in Canada from 5,000 to 17,658, and Royal Navy forces in North American waters swelled from 25 to forty warships, with 1,273 guns (compared to just 500 before the crisis).<sup>12</sup> These measures served two purposes: they bolstered London's diplomacy and, in the event diplomacy failed, they positioned Britain to prevail in a conflict . . .

The United States bowed to London because, already fully occupied militarily trying to subdue the Confederacy, the North could not also afford a simultaneous war with England, which effectively would have brought Britain into the War Between the States on the South's side . . .

The *Trent* affair's outcome is explained by realism, not democratic peace theory. Contrary to democratic peace theory's expectations, the mutual respect between democracies rooted in democratic norms and culture had no influence on British policy. Believing that vital reputational interests affecting its global strategic posture were at stake, London played diplomatic hardball, employed military threats, and was prepared to go to war if necessary. Both the public and the elites in Britain preferred war to conciliation. Across the Atlantic, public and governmental opinion in the North was equally bellicose. An Anglo-American conflict was avoided only because the Lincoln administration came to understand that

diplomatic humiliation was preferable to a war that would have arrayed Britain with the Confederacy and thus probably have secured the South's independence.

### *Anglo-American crisis II: Venezuela, 1895–96*

In 1895–96, the United States and Great Britain found themselves embroiled in a serious diplomatic confrontation arising out of an obscure long-standing dispute between London and Caracas over the Venezuela–British Guiana boundary. By 1895, Caracas was desperately beseeching Washington to pressure London to agree to arbitrate the dispute. The Cleveland administration decided to inject the United States diplomatically into the Anglo-Venezuelan disagreement, but not out of American solicitude for Venezuela's interests or concern for the issue's merits.<sup>13</sup> For the United States, the Anglo-Venezuelan affair was part of a larger picture. By 1895, American policymakers, conscious of the United States's status as an emerging great power, were increasingly concerned about European political and commercial intrusion into the Western Hemisphere.<sup>14</sup> For Washington, the controversy between London and Caracas was a welcome pretext for asserting America's claim to geopolitical primacy in the Western hemisphere. It was for this reason that the United States provoked a showdown on the Anglo-Venezuelan border dispute.<sup>15</sup>

The American position was set forth in Secretary of State Richard Olney's July 20, 1895, note to the British government.<sup>16</sup> The United States stated that its "honor and its interests" were involved in the Anglo-Venezuelan dispute, "the continuance of which it cannot regard with indifference." Washington demanded that London submit the dispute to arbitration. In grandiloquent terms, Olney asserted that the Monroe Doctrine not only gave the United States the right to intervene in the Venezuela affair but also a more general right to superintend the affairs of the Western hemisphere . . .

To the administration's consternation, however, London refused to give in to Washington's demands. British Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary Salisbury's unyielding reply prompted Cleveland's December 17, 1895, message to Congress. While acknowledging that the prospect of an Anglo-American war was an unhappy one to contemplate, the president declared there was "no calamity which a great nation can invite which equals that which follows a supine submission to wrong and injustice and the consequent loss of national self-respect and honor beneath which are shielded and defended a people's safety and greatness." Cleveland strongly defended the validity of the Monroe Doctrine, which he described as vital to America's national security and to the integrity of its domestic political institutions. He asserted that London's exercise of jurisdiction over any territory that the United States determined to belong properly to Venezuela was "willful aggression upon [America's] rights and interests" . . .

In late 1895 Britain and the United States clearly were on a collision course, and conflict almost certainly would have occurred had Britain held fast to the policy line adopted by Salisbury in November 1895. London did not do so, however, and by late January 1896 London and Washington had embarked upon a diplomatic process that culminated in November 1896 in an amicable settlement of Anglo-American differences . . .

Britain concluded that it must settle with Washington because it could not afford yet another enemy. At the critical January 11, 1896, Cabinet meeting, Salisbury remained steadfastly committed to his November "no negotiations" policy, but his colleagues decided to resolve the crisis with Washington peacefully. As Grenville and Young point out: "In November they believed that Britain held all the trump cards [but] the mood was no longer confident. The Cabinet was now inclined to cut Britain's losses in a world which appeared to

have become suddenly hostile.”<sup>17</sup> Overruled by the Cabinet, Salisbury—who believed that eventual war with the United States was “something more than a possibility”—apparently considered resigning the premiership.<sup>18</sup>

There is virtually no evidence that supports a democratic peace theory explanation of the Venezuela crisis’s outcome. Although the crisis ended before either London or Washington could make war-like threats, both the United States and Britain began planning militarily for a possible conflict.<sup>19</sup> This suggests that both British and American policymakers considered that war, or at least the preparation for it, was a legitimate component of their diplomatic strategies . . .

The outcome of the Venezuelan crisis is better explained by realism than by democratic peace theory. Consistent with realist expectations, both Britain and the United States began planning for war. Although, as democratic peace theory would predict, there was no war fever in either Britain or the United States, there is no evidence that public opinion played any role in London’s decision-making process. It was London’s decision to reverse its initially uncompromising stance and instead seek an amicable diplomatic solution with Washington that allowed Britain and the United States to avoid war. All available evidence supports the realist explanation that London made this decision solely for strategic reasons.

### ***The Anglo-French struggle for control of the Nile: Fashoda, 1898***

The Fashoda crisis marked the culmination of the Anglo-French struggle for supremacy over Egypt and the headwaters of the Nile.<sup>20</sup> Until 1882 Egypt, although nominally part of the Ottoman Empire, had been administered by an Anglo-French condominium. In 1882, Britain intervened unilaterally to suppress a nationalist revolt. Because the Suez canal was the vital artery linking Britain with India and its other far eastern imperial interests, strategic considerations overrode London’s initial inclination to withdraw quickly from Egypt after the 1882 intervention. By the early 1890s, Lord Salisbury and other British policymakers had determined that in order to safeguard Egypt, Britain had to exert control over the Nile’s source and its entire valley.

For France, Britain’s post-1882 Egyptian primacy was an affront and, spurred by France’s colonial party, Paris periodically looked for ways in which it could compel London to honor its pledge to withdraw from Egypt. The immediate impetus for the French expedition to Fashoda appears to have come from a January 1893 talk given by the hydraulic engineer Victor Prompt at the Egyptian Institute in Paris, which suggested that the flow of water to Egypt could be restricted by damming the Upper Nile. After reviewing Prompt’s speech, President of the French Republic Sadi Carnot exclaimed, “we must occupy Fashoda!” . . .<sup>21</sup>

French policymakers “deluded themselves” into thinking that by taking Fashoda they could force London to negotiate the Egyptian issue.<sup>22</sup> As early as March 1895, when London had its first intimations about French designs on the upper Nile, Sir Edward Grey, then parliamentary undersecretary for foreign affairs, had stated bluntly that such a move “would be an unfriendly act and would be so viewed in England.”<sup>23</sup> In spring 1898, responding to reports that France was driving on the upper Nile, London decided on an all-out reconquest of Sudan.

After victory at Khartoum, Field Marshal Lord Kitchener was ordered to advance to Fashoda and instructed, in the event he encountered French forces, to do nothing that “would in any way imply a recognition on behalf of Her Majesty’s Government of a title on behalf of France . . . to any portion of the Nile Valley.”<sup>24</sup> On September 19, 1898, Kitchener’s forces

reached Fashoda, where they were greeted by Marchand's band. Although the opposing forces treated each other with elaborate military courtesy, their meeting plunged London and Paris into a deep diplomatic crisis. The Anglo-French "quarrel was not about Fashoda, or about the fate of the Sudan, or even about the security of the Nile waters and of Egypt; it was about the relative status of France and Britain as Powers."<sup>25</sup>

... London adamantly refused to give Paris an alternative to the bleak choice of ordering Marchand's humiliating withdrawal or going to war. On September 18, the British ambassador in Paris told Delcassé "categorically" that London would not consent to any compromise of the Fashoda dispute.<sup>26</sup> On September 30, responding to Delcassé's statement that France would fight rather than submit to a British ultimatum, the British ambassador reiterated that there could be no discussions until Marchand withdrew from Fashoda. Salisbury was determined "to compel, rather than persuade, the French to withdraw" ...<sup>27</sup>

There is no question that France was finally compelled to accept a crushing diplomatic defeat because of its military inferiority *vis-à-vis* Britain. The Royal Navy's power contrasted sharply with the numerical and qualitative deficiencies, and unpreparedness, of the French fleet. When Paris calculated the prevailing Anglo-French military balance, an embarrassing diplomatic climbdown emerged as a more attractive alternative than decisive defeat in a war.<sup>28</sup> As Delcassé admitted, he and President of the Republic Fauré were compelled to order Marchand's withdrawal by "the necessity of avoiding a naval war which we are absolutely incapable of carrying on, even with Russian help."<sup>29</sup> In the end, "Delcassé had no real alternative but to yield; except as an irrational gesture of defiance, war with England was not a possible choice."<sup>30</sup> The Fashoda crisis's outcome was, as Grenville says, "a demonstration of British power and French weakness."<sup>31</sup>

The outcome of the Fashoda crisis is explained by realism, not by democratic peace theory. Believing that vital strategic and reputational interests were at stake, the British ruled out diplomatic accommodation with Paris notwithstanding Delcassé's pleas to be given a face-saving way to extricate France from the crisis. Britain's intransigence runs directly counter to democratic peace theory's expectation that relations between democratic states are governed by mutual respect based on democratic norms and culture. Backed strongly by public and elite opinion, London adopted a policy that left Paris with two stark choices: diplomatic humiliation or military defeat in a war. Counter to democratic peace theory's expectations, but consistent with those of realism, Britain made, and was prepared to carry out, military threats against France. Paris caved in to British demands rather than fight a war it could not win.

### ***Franco-German crisis: the Ruhr, 1923***

... The French military invasion of the Ruhr was prompted by Paris's mounting frustration with Germany's campaign to obtain a significant reduction of its reparations obligations. Although there is some disagreement as to the exact nature of Poincaré's objectives in occupying the Ruhr, the balance of opinion is that the Ruhr occupation was undertaken in an attempt to advance France's goals of revising the Versailles system in its favor. The Ruhr occupation clearly was intended to bolster French security by crippling Germany's economy while simultaneously enabling Paris to realize its ambition of establishing France as Europe's leading economic power. At a minimum, Paris hoped that the Ruhr occupation would inflame Rhenish separatism and lead the Rhineland to break away from the Reich; there is some evidence that the Ruhr occupation was undertaken specifically to advance the

French aims of annexing the Rhineland and dissolving the Reich.<sup>32</sup> Once the Ruhr crisis commenced, France actively abetted the Rhenish separatists . . .

The French military occupation of the Ruhr provoked a major crisis—if not a Franco-German war, at least a quasi-war. A real war was avoided only because Germany lacked the capabilities to wage it. Still the Germans resisted the occupation fiercely. If anything united the fractious Germans of the Weimar Republic, it was hatred for the Versailles system and a determination to overturn it. The Germans believed that the French move was designed to bring about the dissolution of the Reich. Because of Germany's military weakness, the Reichswehr ruled out a policy of active resistance to the French occupation; however, steps were taken to facilitate military resistance in the event the French attempted to advance beyond the Ruhr.<sup>33</sup> Although unable to oppose France militarily, the Berlin government did adopt a policy of resistance to the French occupation, based on the noncooperation of German workers, civil servants, and railway personnel with French occupation authorities. The resistance was not entirely passive; the Reichswehr coordinated an active campaign of sabotage against the French occupation forces.<sup>34</sup> To sustain the resistance, the Berlin government provided the Ruhr population with food and unemployment subsidies. Passive resistance was financed by printing money, a practice that triggered Germany's financial collapse (due to hyperinflation and the concomitant collapse of the mark); this ultimately compelled Berlin to abandon its resistance to the Ruhr occupation. Over the long term, the Ruhr occupation had even more important effects on German domestic politics and public opinion: France's hard line policies strengthened the position of the right-wing nationalist parties in Germany and served to discredit the Weimar democracy.

The Ruhr crisis strongly disconfirms democratic peace theory. In World War I's aftermath, both the public and the elites in France perceived Germany as a dangerous threat to France's security and its great power status, even though Weimar Germany was a democracy. What mattered to the French was Germany's latent power, not its domestic political structure. Contrary to democratic peace theory's predictions, French policy toward democratic Germany reflected none of the mutual respect based on democratic norms and culture that democracies are supposed to display in their relations with each other. On the contrary, driven by strategic concerns, the French used military power coercively to defend the Versailles system upon which they believed their safety depended, rather than entrust their national security to the hope that Germany's postwar democratic institutions would mitigate the geopolitical consequences flowing from the underlying disparity between German and French power.

## **Theoretical conclusions**

Proponents have made sweeping theoretical claims for, and have drawn important policy conclusions from, democratic peace theory. These claims rest on a shaky foundation, however. The case studies presented above subject both democratic peace theory and realism to a robust test. It is striking that in each of these four cases realism, not democratic peace theory, provides the more compelling explanation of why war was avoided. Indeed, the democratic peace theory indicators appear not to have played *any* discernible role in the outcome of these crises.

In each of these crises, at least one of the democratic states involved was prepared to go to war (or, in the case of France in 1923, to use military force coercively) because it believed it had vital strategic or reputational interests at stake. In each of these crises, war was avoided only because one side elected to pull back from the brink. In each of



the four crises, war was avoided not because of the “live and let live” spirit of peaceful dispute resolution at democratic peace theory’s core, but because of realist factors. Adverse distributions of military capabilities explain why France did not fight over Fashoda, and why Germany resisted the French occupation of the Ruhr passively rather than forcibly. Concerns that others would take advantage of the fight (the “waterbirds dilemma”) explain why Britain backed down in the Venezuela crisis, and the Union submitted to Britain’s ultimatum in the *Trent* affair. When one actually looks beyond the *result* of these four crises (“democracies do not fight democracies”) and attempts to understand *why* these crises turned out as they did, it becomes clear that democratic peace theory’s causal logic has only minimal explanatory power . . .

## Notes

- 1 I use the term “democratic peace theory” because it is a convenient shorthand term. However, strictly speaking, the claim that democracies do not fight democracies is a proposition, or hypothesis, rather than a theory. Democratic peace “theory” proposes a causal relationship between an independent variable (democratic political structures at the unit level) and the dependent variable (the asserted absence of war between democratic states). However, it is not a true theory because the causal relationship between the independent and dependent variables is neither proven nor, as I demonstrate in this article, adequately explained. See Stephen Van Evera, “Hypotheses, Laws and Theories: A User’s Guide,” unpub. memo, Department of Political Science, MIT.
- 2 Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), chap. 7; and Russett, “Can A Democratic Peace Be Built?” *International Interactions*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Spring 1993), pp. 277–282.
- 3 In this article, I build upon and expand the criticisms of democratic peace theory found in John J. Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War,” *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Summer 1990), pp. 5–56; and Kenneth N. Waltz, “America as Model for the World? A Foreign Policy Perspective,” *PS* (December 1991), pp. 667–670.
- 4 Melvin Small and J. David Singer first observed the pattern of democracies not fighting democracies in a 1976 article: Small and Singer, “The War-proneness of Democratic Regimes, 1816–1865,” *Jerusalem Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Summer 1976), pp. 50–69. Their finding has been the subject of extensive further empirical testing which has produced a consensus around the propositions stated in the text. See Stuart A. Bremer, “Dangerous Dyads: Conditions Affecting the Likelihood of Interstate War, 1816–1865,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (June 1992), pp. 309–341; Steve Chan, “Mirror, Mirror on the Wall . . . Are the Freer Countries More Pacific?” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (December 1984), pp. 617–648; Zeev Maoz and Nasrin Abdolali, “Regime Type and International Conflict,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (March 1989), pp. 3–35; R.J. Rummel, “Libertarianism and International Violence,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (March 1983), pp. 27–71; Erich Weede, “Democracy and War Involvement,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (December 1984), pp. 649–664.
- 5 Jack S. Levy, “Domestic Politics and War,” in Robert I. Rotberg and Theodore K. Rabb, eds., *The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 88.
- 6 Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace*, p. 33; Michael W. Doyle, “Kant, Liberal Legacies and Foreign Affairs,” Part I, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Summer 1983), p. 213.
- 7 Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, 3rd ed. (South Melbourne: Macmillan Co. of Australia, 1988), pp. 57–67. As the parable goes, while the waterbirds fight over the catch, the fisherman spreads his net.
- 8 My classification of the United States in 1861 and 1895 and of Germany in 1923 as great powers might be challenged. By the mid-nineteenth century British policymakers viewed the United States, because of its size, population, wealth, and growing industrial strength (and latent military power), as “a great world power,” notwithstanding the fact that it was not an active participant in the European state system. Ephraim Douglass Adams, *Great Britain and the American Civil War* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1924), Vol. I, p. 10. In 1895 the perception of American power had heightened in Britain and in other leading European powers. In 1923, Germany, although



substantially disarmed pursuant to Versailles, remained Europe's most economically powerful state. As most statesmen realized, it was, because of its population and industry, a latent continental hegemon. Democratic peace theorists have classified all eight states as having been democracies at the time of their involvement in the crises under discussion. See Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs," part I, pp. 214–215. Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace*, pp. 5–9, briefly discusses the Venezuela and Fashoda crises, but his bibliography has few historical references to these two crises (and related issues), and omits most standard sources.

- 9 Adams, *Britain and the Civil War*, Vol. I, p. 216.
- 10 Quoted in Gordon H. Warren, *Fountain of Discontent: The Trent Affair and Freedom of the Seas* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1981), p. 105.
- 11 Quoted in Adams, *Britain and the Civil War*, Vol. I, p. 217.
- 12 The figures are from Warren, *Fountain of Discontent*, pp. 130, 136. For an overview of British military and naval activities during the *Trent* crisis see Kenneth Bourne, "British Preparations for War with the North, 1861–1862," *English Historical Review*, Vol. 76, No. 301 (October 1961), pp. 600–632.
- 13 Walter LaFeber demonstrates that the United States injected itself into the crisis to protect its own interests, not Venezuela's. LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860–1898* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963), chap. 6.
- 14 The relationship between security concerns and American foreign and strategic policy is discussed in Richard D. Challener, *Admirals, General and Foreign Policy, 1898–1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973) and J.A.S. Grenville and George B. Young, *Politics, Strategy, and American Diplomacy: Studies in American Foreign Policy, 1873–1917* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).
- 15 Walter LaFeber, "The Background of Cleveland's Venezuelan Policy: A Reinterpretation," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 66 No. 4 (July 1961), p. 947; Ernest R. May, *Imperial Democracy: The Emergence of America as a Great Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961), p. 34.
- 16 The full text of the note can be found in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1895* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office), Vol. I, pp. 542–576.
- 17 Grenville and Young, *Politics, Strategy and American Diplomacy*, p. 170; Grenville, *Lord Salisbury and Foreign Policy at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (London: Athlone Press, 1964), pp. 67–69.
- 18 See J.L. Garvin, *Life of Joseph Chamberlain* (London: Macmillan, 1934), Vol. III, p. 161; Salisbury quoted in Bourne, *The Balance of Power in North America*, p. 339.
- 19 Both London and Washington planned for a North American war during early 1896. American planning focused on invading Canada, Britain's on defending it. See Bourne, *The Balance of Power in North America*, pp. 319–331.
- 20 For accounts of the Fashoda crisis and its background, the following are excellent sources: William L. Langer, *The Diplomacy of Imperialism, 1890–1902*, 2d ed. (New York: Knopf, 1965), pp. 101–144, 259–302; Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher with Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (London: Macmillan, 1981, rev. ed.), pp. 76–159, 290–306; G.N. Sanderson, *England, Europe, and the Upper Nile, 1882–1899* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1965), chaps. 12–15; and Sanderson, "The Origins and Significance of the Anglo-French Confrontation at Fashoda," in Prosser Gifford and William Roger Louis, eds., *France and Britain in Africa: Imperial Rivalry and Colonial Rule* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), pp. 285–332.
- 21 Quoted in A.J.P. Taylor, "Prelude to Fashoda: The Question of the Upper Nile, 1894–5," *English Historical Review*, Vol. 65, No. 254 (January 1950), p. 54.
- 22 Langer, *Diplomacy of Imperialism*, pp. 550–551.
- 23 Quoted in James Goode, *The Fashoda Crisis: A Survey of Anglo-French Imperial Policy on the Upper Nile Question, 1882–1899* (Ph.D. diss., North Texas State University, 1971), p. 150; and Darrell Bates, *The Fashoda Incident of 1898: Encounter on the Nile* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 24.
- 24 Lord Salisbury's instructions quoted in Robinson and Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians*, p. 368.
- 25 Sanderson, "Origins and Significance of Fashoda," p. 289.
- 26 Quoted in Robinson and Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians*, p. 370.
- 27 Sanderson, *The Upper Nile*, p. 334.
- 28 Two other factors weighed heavily in Britain's favor: First, Kitchener had an enormous local

- superiority over Marchand on the ground at Fashoda. Second, France's Russian ally made it clear that it would not support Paris and, in any event, even if St. Petersburg had wanted to intervene there was little the Russian navy could do to offset Britain's maritime superiority. See Langer, *Diplomacy of Imperialism*, pp. 559–563; Arthur J. Marder, *Anatomy of British Sea Power: A History of British Naval Policy in the Pre-Dreadnought Era, 1880–1905* (New York: Knopf, 1940), pp. 323, 328–329. As Paul Kennedy observes, “all the best cards were in Britain's hands.” Paul Kennedy, *The Realities Behind Diplomacy: Background Influences on British External Policy, 1865–1980* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), pp. 112–113.
- 29 Quoted in Christopher Andrew, *Theophile Delcasse and the Making of the Entente Cordiale: A Reappraisal of French Foreign Policy, 1898–1905* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 102–103. Faure's reaction to Britain's naval preparations is described in Roger Glenn Brown, *Fashoda Reconsidered: The Impact of Domestic Politics on French Policy in Africa* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), pp. 115–116.
  - 30 Sanderson, *The Upper Nile*, p. 362.
  - 31 Grenville, *Lord Salisbury*, p. 218.
  - 32 McDougall argues that Rhenish separation from the Reich was Poincaré's hope but not his specific goal in the Ruhr operation. Walter A. McDougall, *France's Rhineland Diplomacy, 1914–1924: The Last Bid for a Balance of Power in Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 247–249. Schmidt argues that Poincaré undertook the Ruhr occupation for the specific purpose of gaining permanent territorial control of the Ruhr and Rhineland and promoting the Reich's disintegration. Royal J. Schmidt, *Versailles and the Ruhr: Seedbed of World War II* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968), pp. 232–233.
  - 33 See F.L. Carsten, *The Reichswehr and Politics, 1918 to 1933* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966) pp. 154–155. German preparations included mobilization of reserve units (whose existence was illegal under the terms of Versailles), the purchase of fighter aircraft from Holland and seaplanes from Sweden, and the training of secret units to conduct guerrilla operations behind the lines of any French advance beyond the Ruhr.
  - 34 *Ibid.*, pp. 154–155.

## 10 Engaging the institutionalist critiques

The debate between, on the one hand, what was variously described as institutional theory and neoliberal institutionalism and, on the other, neorealism dominated international relations scholarship for the better part of a decade. Although the debate reprised themes that had appeared in earlier disagreements, the institutionalist alternative to realism received considerable attention after the 1986 publication of Robert Keohane's edited volume *Neorealism and Its Critics*. Much of the focus of the institutionalist critique was aimed at demonstrating that Waltz's neorealism overstated the difficulties of achieving cooperation in the international system.

While agreeing with Waltz that anarchy and the structure of the international system constrain states in important ways, critics argued that international institutions—often embodied in the form of international organizations—make cooperation more plausible, especially in the domain of the international economy. Realists responded by arguing that a focus on institutions can only solve half the problem of cooperation, when states do not live up to their end of a bargain. Institutions have a much more difficult time addressing a more important dimension: the unequal distribution of benefits from agreements that are abided by. Neorealists argue that these concerns over relative gains (i.e. who gains more from a cooperative agreement) will prevent many states from working together toward mutually beneficial ends.

The central points of contention between realists and institutionalists are reviewed in the first reading selection, which comes from David Baldwin's book *Neorealism and Neoliberalism*. Baldwin notes that there are six main focal points in the debate between realists and neoliberal institutionalists, all of which bear on the question of how much cooperation is possible in international relations. While realists and institutionalists agree that states act in a self-help manner, Baldwin argues that they are divided over questions about anarchy and its effects, the limits of international cooperation, the importance of relative versus absolute gains concerns, the priority of state goals, the balance between interests and capabilities, and the impact that institutions have on state behavior.

Robert Keohane and Lisa Martin lay out the institutionalist position in their contribution to the volume *Progress in International Relations Theory*. Using a Lakatosian framework, Keohane and Martin argue that neoliberal institutionalism shares several of realism's core assumptions. These include: (1) that states are the central actors in international politics, (2) that they act under a condition of anarchy, and (3) that they make rational decisions while practicing self-help behavior. Where the two camps break, according to the authors, is over how to explain the cooperative arrangements in which states regularly participate. By treating information as a variable that can be improved through human action, Keohane and Martin insist that institutionalists can explain this type of cooperation, while realism cannot.

The final two readings in the chapter are realist responses to the institutionalist approach. Joseph Grieco's seminal essay contains the core argument that largely defined the terms of the debate that followed. Grieco argues that institutionalism misunderstands realism's interpretation of anarchy and its effect on inter-state relations. According to realists, anarchy compels states to look out for themselves and worry about how gains will be distributed if they enter into cooperative agreements. Grieco insists that institutionalists miss this point by focusing narrowly on absolute gains as a barrier to cooperation. As a result, they exaggerate the chances for collaboration between states. Institutionalists argue that the absence of an overarching authority means that states are free to renege on their agreements, thus putting absolute gains from cooperation at risk. Realists argue that the absence of an overarching authority means that states are free to damage one another. Hence, the relevant question is not whether the other state will cheat, but whether they will gain more from cooperation, and use that increment in relative capabilities to do harm.

John Mearsheimer also disbelieves the beneficial effects of institutions, skeptically examining the claim that they push states away from war. He provides a restatement and critique of the logic of three different institutionalist arguments. The section of the article redacted in this chapter focuses on liberal institutionalism. After restating the realist view of institutions, Mearsheimer discusses the logical underpinning and empirical record of liberal institutionalism. He argues that the historical record is ripe with examples of states avoiding cooperative agreements because of fears about which party would gain more. Mearsheimer suggests there are few examples of states failing to cooperate because of concerns over absolute gains. According to Mearsheimer, where cooperation has occurred, it is not because international institutions have ameliorated concerns over cheating and absolute gains. Instead, he argues that the cooperation that has taken place has been the result of the minimization of concerns over relative gains, and he also suggests that the cooperation would have occurred even if the institutions had not been present.

# Neoliberalism, neorealism, and world politics

*David A. Baldwin*

From: *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 3–25.

In 1986 Robert O. Keohane edited a volume entitled *Neorealism and Its Critics*, which focused on the reformulation of traditional realist thinking about international politics by Kenneth Waltz (1979) and reactions from a variety of scholars. Waltz had recast the tenets of classical realism in order to delineate more clearly the effects of the structure of the international system on the behavior of nation-states. In addition, Waltz viewed his work as different from that of earlier realists in its treatment of power and of states as units of the system (Waltz 1979; 1990). The critics, according to Keohane (1986:24), sought to move beyond the nation-state by “devising new international institutions or regimes,” by reinterpreting the principles of sovereignty, or by challenging the “validity of the ‘state as actor’ model on which neorealism relies.” Whereas some critics called for more attention to economic and environmental interdependence as well as changes in governmental functions, information, and international regimes, others attacked the epistemology on which Waltz based his argument . . .

In recent years the most powerful challenge to neorealism, sometimes labeled *structural realism*, has been mounted by neoliberal institutionalists. The term distinguishes these scholars from earlier varieties of liberalism, such as commercial liberalism, republican liberalism, and sociological liberalism (Nye 1988; Grieco 1988:488n, Keohane 1990). *Commercial liberalism* refers to theories linking free trade and peace; *republican liberalism* refers to theories linking democracy with peace; and *sociological liberalism* refers to theories linking transnational interactions with international integration. The immediate intellectual precursors of liberal institutionalism are theories of international regimes (Krasner 1983).

## **Neoliberalism and neorealism: terms of the contemporary debate**

Six focal points, described below, characterize the current debate between neoliberalism and neorealism.

### ***The nature and consequences of anarchy***

Although no one denies that the international system is anarchical in some sense, there is disagreement as to what this means and why it matters. Arthur Stein (1982:324) distinguishes between the “independent decision making” that characterizes anarchy and the “joint decision making” in international regimes and then suggests that it is the self interests of autonomous states in a state of anarchy that leads them to create international regimes.

Charles Lipson (1984:22) notes that the idea of anarchy is the “Rosetta stone of international relations” but suggests that its importance has been exaggerated by the neorealists at the expense of recognizing the importance of international interdependence. Robert Axelrod and Robert O. Keohane (1985) emphasize the importance of anarchy defined as the absence of government but argue that this constant feature of world politics permits a variety of patterns of interaction among states. Joseph M. Grieco (1988:497–98) contends that neoliberals and neorealists fundamentally diverge with respect to the nature and consequences of anarchy. He asserts that the neoliberal institutionalists underestimate the importance of worries about survival as motivations for state behavior, which he sees as a necessary consequence of anarchy. Helen Milner (1991:70, 81–82) identifies the “discovery of orderly features of world politics amidst its seeming chaos” as “perhaps the central achievement of neorealists,” but she agrees with Lipson that the idea of anarchy has been overemphasized while interdependence has been neglected. Duncan Snidal (1991) views Prisoner’s Dilemma (PD) situations as examples of the realist conception of anarchy, while Grieco (1988) associates PD with neoliberalism. In general, neorealists see anarchy as placing more severe constraints on state behavior than do neoliberals.

### ***International cooperation***

Although both sides agree that international cooperation is possible, they differ as to the ease and likelihood of its occurrence. According to Grieco [1993], neorealists view international cooperation as “harder to achieve, more difficult to maintain, and more dependent on state power” than do the neoliberals. None of the neoliberals represented [here] disagrees with this assessment. Both Keohane and Grieco agree that the future of the European Community will be an important test of their theories. If the trend toward European integration weakens or suffers reversals, the neorealists will claim vindication. If progress toward integration continues, the neoliberals will presumably view this as support for their views.

### ***Relative versus absolute gains***

Although it would be misleading to characterize one side as concerned only with relative gains and the other as concerned only with absolute gains, the neoliberals have stressed the absolute gains from international cooperation, while the neorealists have emphasized relative gains. The basic reference point for many of the authors in this volume is the following passage by a leading neorealist:

When faced with the possibility of cooperating for mutual gain, states that feel insecure must ask how the gain will be divided. They are compelled to ask not “Will both of us gain?” but “Who will gain more?” If an expected gain is to be divided, say, in the ratio of two to one, one state may use its disproportionate gain to implement a policy intended to damage or destroy the other. Even the prospect of large absolute gains for both parties does not elicit their cooperation so long as each fears how the other will use its increased capabilities.

(Waltz 1979:105)

Stein (1982:318) depicts the liberal view of self interest as one in which actors with common interests try to maximize their absolute gains. Actors trying to maximize relative gains,



he asserts, have no common interests. Lipson (1984:15–18) suggests that relative gains considerations are likely to be more important in security matters than in economic affairs. Grieco (1988:487) contends that neoliberal institutionalism has been preoccupied with actual or potential absolute gains from international cooperation and has overlooked the importance of relative gains. He suggests that “*the fundamental goal of states in any relationship is to prevent others from achieving advances in their relative capabilities*” (Grieco 1988:498; italics in original). Snidal (1991) disputes the neorealist contention that concerns about relative gains inhibit cooperation except in the special case of bipolar relationships between states preoccupied with relative gains. He also suggests that the distinction between relative and absolute gains is not so clear-cut as it might seem. The relative gains problem can be stated in terms of trade-offs between long- and short-term absolute gains. Powell (1991) uses deductive models to argue that concerns about relative gains will inhibit cooperation when the utility of military force is high but not when the utility of force is low.<sup>1</sup> Mastanduno (1991) uses empirical case studies to address the questions of whether and how relative gains matter. His conclusions provide some support for both sides of the debate. While he finds concerns about relative gains present in the policy-making process in all of his three cases, such concerns were not reflected in the policy outcomes for all the cases. . . . Keohane [1993] acknowledges that neoliberal institutionalists have underestimated the importance of relative gains in world politics under certain conditions. The important thing, according to Keohane, is to specify those conditions. He notes that this may be difficult since the behavior of states pursuing relative gains may be very similar to the behavior of states pursuing absolute gains.

### ***Priority of state goals***

Neoliberals and neorealists agree that both national security and economic welfare are important, but they differ in relative emphasis on these goals. Lipson (1984) argues that international cooperation is more likely in economic issue areas than in those concerning military security. Since neorealists tend to study security issues and neoliberals tend to study political economy, their differing estimates of the ease of cooperation may be related to the issues they study. Grieco (1988) contends that anarchy requires states to be preoccupied with relative power, security, and survival. Powell (1991) constructs a model intended to bridge the gap between neoliberal emphasis on economic welfare and neorealist emphasis of security. In his model, states are assumed to be trying to maximize their economic welfare in a world where military force is a possibility. For the most part, neorealists or neoliberals treat state goals by assumption. As Keohane [1993] points out, neither approach is good at predicting interests.

### ***Intentions versus capabilities***

The classical realist Hans J. Morgenthau depicted concern about the motives of statesmen as a fallacious way to understand foreign policy. Instead he advocated assuming that statesmen “think and act in terms of interest defined as power” (1967:5–6), which, he believed, would enable analysts to understand the actions and thoughts of statesmen better than they themselves do. Although contemporary neorealists are unlikely to take such an extreme position, they are likely to emphasize capabilities more than intentions. Grieco (1988:498, 500) points out that uncertainties about the future intentions and interests of other states lead statesmen to pay close attention to capabilities, “the ultimate basis for their security and

independence.” In a similar vein, Krasner (1991) criticizes the neoliberals for overemphasizing intentions, interests, and information and underemphasizing the distribution of capabilities. Keohane [1993] argues that the sensitivity of states to the relative gains of other states is significantly influenced by perceptions of the intentions of such states. Thus states worry more about relative gains of enemies than of allies. Stein (1982) explains international regimes in terms of the pattern of preferences of member states. In Stein’s analysis, capabilities count only insofar as they affect the preferences and intentions of states. Differing views of the relative importance of capabilities and intentions thus provide another focal point of the debate.

### *Institutions and regimes*

Both neorealists and neoliberals recognize the plethora of international regimes and institutions that have emerged since 1945. They differ, however, with respect to the significance of such arrangements. “Much of the contemporary debate,” according to Keohane [1993], “centers on the validity of the institutionalist claim that international regimes, and institutions more broadly, have become significant in world politics.” The neorealists agree that this is an important point of contention. They believe that neoliberals exaggerate the extent to which institutions are able to “mitigate anarchy’s constraining effects on inter-state cooperation” (Grieco 1988:485) . . .

Important as it is to clarify the terms of the debate, it is also important to clarify what the debate is *not* about. Although the following four issues have figured prominently in earlier debates between realism and its critics, none is central to the current debate between neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism. First, the current debate does not revolve around techniques of statecraft. In 1977 Keohane and Nye listed the assumption that military force is a “usable and effective instrument of policy” (pp. 23–29) as one of the fundamental tenets of realism, one that they proceeded to call into question. Yet in 1988, Grieco’s description of the five central propositions of realism mentions only a concern for power and security and says nothing about the utility of military force. Despite fleeting references to this issue by some of the authors (e.g., Grieco 1988:491n; Milner 1991:76, 78; Krasner 1991:342), only Robert Powell (1991) devotes much attention to the question of the utility of military techniques of statecraft. It is not clear why this issue receives so little attention since it does not seem to have been resolved. One should not be surprised if it resurfaces as the debate evolves.

Second, earlier critics of realism, especially in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, often cast the debate as one between altruistic moralists and egoistic power calculators. In the current debate, however, both sides argue from assumptions that states behave like egoistic value maximizers. Moral considerations are hardly mentioned. Third, the question of whether to treat states as the essential actors in international politics has been pushed into the background. Although neorealists and neoliberals disagree on the relative importance of nonstate actors, both treat states as the primary actors. And fourth, this is not a debate between conflict theorists and cooperation theorists. The twin ideas that conflict and cooperation are intrinsic elements of international politics and that both can be studied at the same time are accepted by both sides. The books by neorealist Joseph M. Grieco (1990) and neoliberal Robert O. Keohane (1984) are contributions to theories of conflict *and* cooperation. Although neorealists are more likely to emphasize conflict and neoliberals are more likely to emphasize cooperation, both sides have moved beyond the simple dichotomy between cooperation and conflict that characterized earlier discussions.<sup>2</sup>

The quality of scholarly debate . . . is extraordinarily high. That is to say, the authors genuinely try to understand and address one another's arguments. The overall tone of the [debate] signals a desire to advance knowledge rather than to score debating points in defense of entrenched positions.

There is, however, one unsatisfactory aspect of the debate. This might be called the terminological dimension. Loaded terms and semantic sleight of hand are anathema to scholarly debate. In this volume each school of thought carries an unfortunate label. Research programs, as Stephen Krasner (1991) points out, have connotations as well as denotations. And the connotation of "realism" (or "neorealism") is one of looking at the world as it really is. This was not only the connotation but the denotation as well for two of the intellectual forefathers of neorealism. For E. H. Carr, realism focused on "what was and what is" in contrast to utopianism, which focused on what could and should be (Carr 1946:11). For Hans J. Morgenthau, realism earned its name by concentrating on "human nature as it actually is" and on "historic processes as they actually take place" (Morgenthau 1967:4). Inis L. Claude's characterization of the usage of the phrase "balance of power" by an earlier generation of realists reminds us that scholarly debate can be impaired by loaded terminology:

[There is a] widespread tendency to make balance of power a symbol of realism, and hence of responsibility, for the scholar or statesman. In this usage, it has no substantive meaning as a concept. It is a test of intellectual virility, of he-manliness in the field of international relations. The man who "accepts" the balance of power, who dots his writing with approving references to it, thereby asserts his claim to being a hard-headed realist, who can look at the grim reality of power without flinching. The man who rejects the balance of power convicts himself of softness, of cowardly incapacity to look power in the eye and acknowledge its role in the affairs of states.

(Claude 1962:39)

It is unfortunate that the current debate still uses the misleading terms *realism* and *neorealism*. The debate . . . is not between those who study the world as it is and those who study the world as it should be; it is between two groups of scholars with reasonable disagreements as to how to describe and interpret the real world.

The term *liberalism* is objectionable less because of value loading than because it is likely to confuse and mislead. Neither realism nor liberalism has traditionally been considered the opposite of the other. The usual opposite of liberalism is conservatism. The term liberalism has figured more prominently in discussions of domestic politics than in discussions of international politics. Except for the relatively recent debate with respect to the propensity of liberal democracies to make war, the term liberalism has been largely confined to the discussion of economic aspects of international relations.<sup>3</sup>

Despite such objections, the terms *neorealism* (or *structural realism*) and *neoliberalism* (or *neoliberal institutionalism*) are so deeply embedded in the literature that little can be done. Perhaps as the debate progresses, we can develop more satisfactory labels for various schools of thought. Keohane [1993] is also uncomfortable with the labels. He suggests that liberal institutionalism "borrows as much from realism as from liberalism . . ."

## Notes

- 1 Powell refers to situations in which “the use of force is at issue.” I interpret this to refer to situations in which force is feasible or high in utility. For a discussion of how the utility of a technique of statecraft is determined, see Baldwin (1985).
- 2 For a poignant example of both the importance and difficulty of combining studies of conflict and cooperation, see the preface added in 1980 to Thomas C. Schelling’s classic *The Strategy of Conflict* (1960).
- 3 For discussion of liberalism in the international context, see Doyle (1983; 1986); and Zacher and Matthew (1992).

## References

- Axelrod, Robert and Robert O. Keohane. “Achieving Cooperation Under Anarchy: Strategies and Institutions.” *World Politics* 38 (October 1985): 226–54.
- Baldwin, David A. *Economic Statecraft*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.
- Carr, E.H. *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919–1939*, 2nd edn. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1946.
- Claude, Inis L., Jr. *Power and International Relations*. New York: Random House, 1962.
- Doyle, Michael. “Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs. Parts 1 and 2.” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12 (1983): 205–35, 323–53.
- . “Liberalism and World Politics.” *American Political Science Review* 80 (December 1986): 1151–69.
- Grieco, Joseph. “Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism.” *International Organization* 42 (August 1988): 485–507.
- . *Cooperation among Nations: Europe, America, and Non-Tariff Barriers to Trade*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990.
- . “Understanding the Problem of International Cooperation: The Limits of Neoliberal Institutionalism and the Future of Realist Theory.” In *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate*, edited by David A. Baldwin. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.
- Keohane, Robert O. *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984.
- . “Realism, Neorealism and the Study of World Politics.” In *Neorealism and Its Critics* edited by Robert O. Keohane. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.
- . “International Liberalism Reconsidered.” In *The Economic Limits to Modern Politics*, edited by John Dunn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- . “Institutional Theory and the Realist Challenge After the Cold War.” In *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate*, edited by David A. Baldwin. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.
- Keohane, Robert O., and Joseph S. Nye, Jr. *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1977.
- Krasner, Stephen D., ed. *International Regimes*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983.
- . “Global Communication and National Power: Life on the Pareto Frontier.” *World Politics* 43 (April 1991): 336–66.
- Lipson, Charles. “International Cooperation in Economic and Security Affairs.” *World Politics* 37 (October 1984): 1–23.
- Mastanduno, Michael. “Do Relative Gains Matter? America’s Response to Japanese Industrial Policy.” *International Security* 16 (Summer 1991): 73–113.
- Milner, Helen V. “The Assumption of Anarchy in International Relations Theory: A Critique.” *Review of International Studies* 17 (January 1991): 67–85.
- Morgenthau, Hans J. *Politics among Nations*. New York: Knopf, [1948] 1967.
- Nye, Joseph S. Jr. “Neorealism and Neoliberalism.” *World Politics* 40 (January 1988): 235–51.
- Powell, Robert. “In the Pursuit of Power and Plenty.” Unpublished typescript. University of California, Berkeley, 1991.

- Schelling, Thomas C. *The Strategy of Conflict*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960.
- Snidal, Duncan. "Relative Gains and the Pattern of International Cooperation." *American Political Science Review* 85 (September 1991): 387–402.
- Stein, Arthur A. "Coordination and Collaboration Regimes in an Anarchic World." *International Organization* 36 (Spring 1982): 299–324.
- Waltz, Kenneth N. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979.
- . "Realist Thought and Neorealist Theory." *Journal of International Affairs* 44 (Spring/Summer 1990): 21–37.
- Zachar, Mark W. and Richard A. Matthew. "Liberal International Theory: Common Threads, Divergent Strands." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, IL., September, 1992.

# Institutional theory as a research program

*Robert O. Keohane and Lisa L. Martin*

From: *Progress in International Relations Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003): 71–107.

## **Institutional theory as a partial challenge to realism**

Institutional theory proceeded roughly as a Lakatosian would suggest. It restated the core of the realist research program; identified and emphasized anomalies facing realism; proposed a new theory to resolve those anomalies; specified a key observational implication of its theory; and sought to test hypotheses based on that theoretical implication, searching for novel facts.

### ***Realism according to institutionalists***

Institutionalists begin with a restatement of the explicit core assumptions of realism, which can be identified as follows: 1) states are the primary actors in world politics; 2) states behave as if they were rational, in the sense that they assess their strategic situations in light of their environments, and seek to maximize expected gains; 3) states pursue their interests (which prominently include survival), rather than behaving altruistically; 4) states operate in a world of “anarchy,” without common government. Different realists claim to hold different assumptions, although the list of four above, including anarchy, is fairly conventional.<sup>1</sup> This list seems consistent with the argument, if not the explicit assumptions, of Kenneth N. Waltz in his classic book, *Theory of International Politics*.<sup>2</sup> Institutional theory fully shares the first three of these assumptions. It also accepts the fourth assumption, that of anarchy, strictly defined as the absence of an external enforcer of agreements. However, institutional theorists are careful to distinguish anarchy in this sense from chaos, and do not accept neorealist assertions that the fact of anarchy has far-reaching negative implications for cooperation.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, institutionalists have sought to show that there can be “cooperation under anarchy.”<sup>4</sup> From a theoretical standpoint, one of the most striking features of institutional theory, in contrast to the “liberal” international relations theories with which it is often identified, is that it embraces so much of the hard core of realism.

On the basis of such assumptions as the four listed above, Waltz and his followers inferred that states would cooperate little except in response to the prospect of confronting dangerous concentrations of power, or alternatively in response to threat.<sup>5</sup> Institutional theory questions this inference.

### ***Identifying anomalies in realism***

Realism has been confronted with, in Lakatos’s phrase, an “ocean of anomalies.” Some of these anomalies derive from events that occurred before Waltz’s influential 1979 formulation.



For instance, Paul Schroeder has pointed out anomalies in Waltz's argument about balancing, and John Vasquez has argued, using standards derived from Lakatos, that "the neotraditional research program on balancing has been degenerating," as a result of ad hoc attempts by realists to respond to such anomalies.<sup>6</sup> Other anomalies have appeared since 1979, either because important regularities seem to have been overlooked earlier, such as that democracies are disinclined to fight one another, or because of new developments such as the fact that non-state actors and issue-networks are becoming more visible and apparently more consequential.<sup>7</sup>

By themselves, these anomalies are not particularly disturbing from a Lakatosian perspective. Research programs confront anomalies and seek to resolve them. From the standpoint of institutional theory, however, one of these anomalies was telling: that international cooperation is extensive and highly institutionalized. Examples include the emergence of a highly rule-oriented trade regime under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and then the World Trade Organization (WTO); the significance in managing the global economy of the International Monetary Fund (IMF); the uneven but impressively institutionalized cooperation of the European Union (EU); the invention of a variety of regional and global environmental institutions; and even the robust institutionalization of security cooperation in NATO.<sup>8</sup> To the surprise of realist scholars, such institutionalization has not only continued after the disappearance of the Soviet threat, but has expanded, both in Europe and in the world political economy.<sup>9</sup>

The origins of modern institutional theory can be traced, following a classic Lakatosian pattern, to a disjuncture between established realist theory and the stubborn, persistent fact of extensive, increasing, and highly institutionalized cooperation. Waltz predicted that states would be reluctant to engage in forms of cooperation that left them at risk of being taken advantage of by other states. Because security is scarce in international politics, and the environment is highly uncertain, states are forced to behave in a highly risk-averse manner. Thus, realists argued against the likelihood of states engaging in extensive and persistent forms of cooperation. States might cooperate with one another, but only on a short-term, ad hoc basis. Because only these shallow forms of cooperation would arise, there was little need for international institutions in which to structure long-term patterns of cooperation. Realism's predictions about cooperation and institutions were admirably clear: cooperation should be shallow and tenuous, and institutions should be weak and have no observable impact on patterns of cooperation.<sup>10</sup>

The very clarity of Waltz's argument made it difficult to evade the anomaly created by the fact of institutionalized cooperation. Keohane explicitly drew on Lakatosian ideas about research programs to note persistent discrepancies between neorealist predictions and actual state behavior.<sup>11</sup> In particular, he argued that states sometimes engage in deep patterns of cooperation. On issues ranging from economic integration to environmental protection to military alliances, states take steps that put themselves at risk of exploitation in the short term, in exchange for the promise of the longer-term benefits of cooperation. In addition, they have constructed institutions to sustain and enhance these patterns of cooperation. Keohane recognized that these institutions were not "strong," in the sense that many domestic institutions are understood to be strong: for example, they had little centralized enforcement power.<sup>12</sup> The puzzle prompted by this observation was: how could institutions facilitate cooperation among states that had conflicts of interest but nevertheless could benefit from cooperation?

***Institutionalist theory***

Institutional theory seeks to understand the anomalies facing realist theory by building on, but going beyond, some premises that it has in common with realism. Institutional theory seeks to understand the existence of international institutions, and how they operate. Institutions are defined as “persistent and connected sets of rules (formal and informal) that prescribe behavioral roles, constrain activity, and shape expectations.”<sup>13</sup> They can take the form of formal intergovernmental or nongovernmental organizations, international regimes, and informal conventions. Following Douglass North, we conceive of organizations as actors or “players,” and institutions as rules that define how the game is played.<sup>14</sup> Regimes are sets of rules and norms that may be formal or informal; conventions are informal understandings.

Early institutional theory sought to show that, even given realist assumptions, international institutions should be seen as significant for the policies followed by states, and thus for the realization of important values in world politics. Such authors as Robert Axelrod and Robert Keohane relied on analysis of mixed-motive games such as the Prisoners’ Dilemma to identify factors that would support cooperation, and drew attention to the role of reciprocity and information in allowing states to reach the Pareto frontier of efficient international arrangements.<sup>15</sup> These formulations shared the traditional realist conceptualization of states as rational actors pursuing self-interest.

In comparison to the liberal idealism that preceded it, and the constructivism that has followed, institutional theory constituted an incremental modification of realism. Advocates of institutional theory embraced, rather than abandoned, the three core assumptions that it shared with realism; even disagreements over the anarchy assumption were not fundamental to institutional theory. The crucial assumption of realism altered by institutional theory was implicit rather than explicit. Changing this assumption, however, enabled institutional theorists to challenge the validity of the inferences about state behavior that realists had made on the basis of the shared assumptions.

The changed core assumption has to do with the informational environment of international relations. Realism assumes that information about the intentions of other states is pertinent, but of poor quality. States must therefore assume the worst, and thus behave in a defensive, wary manner.<sup>16</sup> More importantly, realists assume that states cannot systematically improve the information conditions in which they operate. This assumption dates back to classical realism, being a major part of the analysis of E.H. Carr, for example.<sup>17</sup> Scarce information, and the inability of states to do anything to improve the situation, force states to adopt worst-case scenarios when choosing their strategies.

Institutional theory, in contrast, explicitly treats information as a variable. Most important, it treats information as a variable that can be influenced by human action. Institutional theory agrees with realism that scarcity of information will impede the efforts of states to engage in cooperative activities with one another. However, since institutional theory assumes that information can be changed by human agency, it argues that states will take steps to improve the informational environment under these conditions, especially if scarcity of information is impeding the attainment of substantial mutual gains from cooperation. Institutional theory has focused on the role of institutions in improving the informational environment. They can do so in numerous ways, such as by providing information about the intentions and activities of others, by setting standards and identifying focal points, or by providing reliable causal information about the relationship between actions and outcomes. Institutional theory points out that states may be as concerned with providing information about themselves—hence

bolstering their credibility and therefore the value of their commitments—as they are with acquiring information about others. States therefore construct institutions to improve both their information about others and their own credibility, to ameliorate the dilemmas and defensive stances otherwise dictated by realism's hard core assumptions . . .

### *Specifying observable implications*

Institutional theory's core assumption, that variations in information could result from human agency, generated an observational implication of its theory: states should devise strategies to construct international institutions that could provide information and reinforce credibility. The positive heuristic of the institutionalist research program, consisting of a "partially articulated set of suggestions or hints," in Lakatos's words, on how to change and develop the refutable aspects of the research program, was aimed at analyzing both institutional growth and state strategies to institute and maintain institutions.<sup>18</sup>

The logic of mixed-motive games combined with the scarcity of information led to specification of a heuristically novel fact: international institutions should engage more heavily in monitoring and information-sharing than in enforcement. In order for reciprocity to work efficiently to sustain cooperation, states required reliable information about other states' preferences and actions. Yet such information was hard to come by in international politics. The key original insight of institutional theory was that institutions could, through monitoring, provide such information. In particular, they could provide information about whether states were living up to their commitments. With this information timely in hand, states could devise strategies of decentralized enforcement that would allow cooperation to emerge as an equilibrium in a repeated game. The key proposition of institutional theory, therefore, was that international institutions should have substantial monitoring and information-sharing authority, while providing for decentralized enforcement by member states themselves . . .

### **Notes**

- 1 See Joseph Grieco, "The Maastricht Treaty, Economic and Monetary Union, and the Neo-Realist Research Program," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 21 (January 1995), p. 27. Grieco lists "three assumptions," but one is that actors are "substantively and instrumentally rational," which we interpret as incorporating both assumption 2 and assumption 3, in our formulation. The editors of this volume add the assumption of self-help, which we regard as a derivation from the others, although some have questioned whether this derivation is logically sound.
- 2 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979). Waltz's systematization of realism is often referred to as "neorealism," but to maintain simplicity of language, we refer throughout to realism, by which we mean the most explicit and systematic variants of that diverse school, in particular those developed by Waltz. Waltz denies that he assumes rationality or anarchy, claiming as he reaffirmed in the Scottsdale conference that he only assumes that "states want to survive." However, this statement contains the assumption that states are key actors, since if they were not actors, they could not "want" anything, even metaphorically, and if they were not key, his theory would presumably focus on the important actors. Furthermore, "want to survive" is a definition of their self-interest, and therefore implies self-interest. As one of us has argued elsewhere, for Waltz's theory to move from desires to actions, the rationality assumption seems essential, since evolutionary selection is not reliable in international relations. Keohane, "Theory of World Politics." It therefore seems evident that Waltz makes the three assumptions that we ascribe both to institutional theory and to realism. Waltz is the scholar who has most popularized the notion of "anarchy," so we regard it as his business, not ours, if he decides that it is not so fundamental after all.

- 3 Helen V. Milner, "The Assumption of Anarchy in International Relations Theory: A Critique," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 17 (January 1991), pp. 67–85; Robert Powell, "Anarchy in International Relations Theory: The Neorealist–Neoliberal Debate," *International Organization*, Vol. 48, No.2 (Spring 1994), pp. 313–44.
- 4 Kenneth A. Oye, ed., *Cooperation Under Anarchy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).
- 5 On threat, see Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987).
- 6 Paul W. Schroeder, "Historical Reality versus Neorealist Theory," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No.1 (Summer 1994), pp. 108–48; John Vasquez, "The Realist Paradigm and Degenerative versus Progressive Research Programs: An Appraisal of Neotraditional Research on Waltz's Balancing Proposition," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No.4 (December 1997), p. 910.
- 7 Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998).
- 8 Celeste Wallander and Robert Keohane, "Risk, Threat and Security Institutions," in Helga Haftendorn, Robert O. Keohane, and Celeste A. Wallander, eds., *Imperfect Unions: Security Institutions over Time and Space* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1999). Our examples, here and throughout the paper, refer to both formal and informal institutions. Thus both formal organizations and informal sets of rules that make up some regimes or conventions are relevant to institutional theory; we see both as forms of institutions.
- 9 For one set of realist expectations, see John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Summer 1990), pp. 5–56.
- 10 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*. George Downs and David Rocke, *Optimal Imperfection? Domestic Uncertainty and Institutions in International Relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), distinguish between deep and shallow forms of cooperation. Deep cooperation involves sunk costs, implying that states can lose if others renege on cooperative arrangements. According to neorealist logic, this risk should strongly inhibit states from engaging in deep cooperation.
- 11 Robert O. Keohane, "Theory of World Politics: Structural Realism and Beyond," in Ada Finifter, ed., *Political Science: The State of the Discipline* (Washington, D.C.: American Political Science Association, 1983), pp. 503–504; reprinted in Robert O. Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), chap. 7.
- 12 Below, we note that understandings of domestic institutions have substantially changed in recent years, so that the characterization of them as strong external enforcers of contracts and other agreements is no longer universally accepted.
- 13 Robert O. Keohane, *International Institutions and State Power* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1989), p. 3.
- 14 Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 4–5.
- 15 Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).
- 16 Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future"; Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*. Charles Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No.3 (Winter 1994), pp. 50–90, has most directly examined this precept of realism, suggesting that under some conditions information is in fact not scarce, and that states can utilize signaling strategies to inform others of their intentions. He asserts that changing this assumption about information is consistent with realism.
- 17 Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939* (New York: Harper & Row, 1939).
- 18 Imre Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programs," in Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave, eds., *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 135.

# Anarchy and the limits of cooperation

## A realist critique of the newest liberal institutionalism

*Joseph M. Grieco*

From: *International Organization* 42 (Summer 1988): 485–507.

Realism has dominated international relations theory at least since World War II.<sup>1</sup> For realists, international anarchy fosters competition and conflict among states and inhibits their willingness to cooperate even when they share common interests. Realist theory also argues that international institutions are unable to mitigate anarchy's constraining effects on inter-state cooperation. Realism, then, presents a pessimistic analysis of the prospects for international cooperation and of the capabilities of international institutions.<sup>2</sup>

The major challenger to realism has been what I shall call liberal institutionalism. Prior to the current decade, it appeared in three successive presentations—functionalist integration theory in the 1940s and early 1950s, neofunctionalist regional integration theory in the 1950s and 1960s, and interdependence theory in the 1970s.<sup>3</sup> All three versions rejected realism's propositions about states and its gloomy understanding of world politics. Most significantly, they argued that international institutions can help states cooperate. Thus, compared to realism, these earlier versions of liberal institutionalism offered a more hopeful prognosis for international cooperation and a more optimistic assessment of the capacity of institutions to help states achieve it.

International tensions and conflicts during the 1970s undermined liberal institutionalism and reconfirmed realism in large measure. Yet, that difficult decade did not witness a collapse of the international system, and, in the light of continuing modest levels of inter-state cooperation, a new liberal institutionalist challenge to realism came forward during the early 1980s.<sup>4</sup> What is distinctive about this newest liberal institutionalism is its claim that it accepts a number of core realist propositions, including, apparently, the realist argument that anarchy impedes the achievement of international cooperation. However, the core liberal arguments—that realism overemphasizes conflict and underestimates the capacities of international institutions to promote cooperation—remain firmly intact. The new liberal institutionalists basically argue that even if the realists are correct in believing that anarchy constrains the willingness of states to cooperate, states nevertheless can work together and can do so especially with the assistance of international institutions . . .

This essay's principal argument is that, in fact, neoliberal institutionalism misconstrues the realist analysis of international anarchy and therefore it misunderstands the realist analysis of the impact of anarchy on the preferences and actions of states. Indeed, the new liberal institutionalism fails to address a major constraint on the willingness of states to cooperate which is generated by international anarchy and which is identified by realism. As a result, the new theory's optimism about international cooperation is likely to be proven wrong.

Neoliberalism's claims about cooperation are based on its belief that states are atomistic

actors. It argues that states seek to maximize their individual *absolute* gains and are indifferent to the gains achieved by others. Cheating, the new theory suggests, is the greatest impediment to cooperation among rationally egoistic states, but international institutions, the new theory also suggests, can help states overcome this barrier to joint action. Realists understand that states seek absolute gains and worry about compliance. However, realists find that states are *positional*, not atomistic, in character, and therefore realists argue that, in addition to concerns about cheating, states in cooperative arrangements also worry that their partners might gain more from cooperation than they do. For realists, a state will focus both on its absolute and relative gains from cooperation, and a state that is satisfied with a partner's compliance in a joint arrangement might nevertheless exit from it because the partner is achieving relatively greater gains. Realism, then, finds that there are at least two major barriers to international cooperation: state concerns about cheating and state concerns about relative achievements of gains. Neoliberal institutionalism pays attention exclusively to the former, and is unable to identify, analyze, or account for the latter.

Realism's identification of the relative gains problem for cooperation is based on its insight that states in anarchy fear for their survival as independent actors. According to realists, states worry that today's friend may be tomorrow's enemy in war, and fear that achievements of joint gains that advantage a friend in the present might produce a more dangerous *potential* foe in the future. As a result, states must give serious attention to the gains of partners. Neoliberals fail to consider the threat of war arising from international anarchy, and this allows them to ignore the matter of relative gains and to assume that states only desire absolute gains. Yet, in doing so, they fail to identify a major source of state inhibitions about international cooperation.

In sum, I suggest that realism, its emphasis on conflict and competition notwithstanding, offers a more complete understanding of the problem of international cooperation than does its latest liberal challenger. If that is true, then realism is still the most powerful theory of international politics . . .

. . . [R]ealist theory rejects neoliberalism's exclusive focus on cheating. Differences in the realist and neoliberal understanding of the problem of cooperation result from a fundamental divergence in their interpretations of the basic meaning of international anarchy. Neoliberal institutionalism offers a well-established definition of anarchy, specifying that it means "the lack of common government in world politics."<sup>5</sup> Neoliberalism then proceeds to identify one major effect of international anarchy. Because of anarchy, according to neoliberals, individuals or states believe that no agency is available to "enforce rules," or to "enact or enforce rules of behavior," or to "force them to cooperate with each other."<sup>6</sup> As a result, according to neoliberal theory, "cheating and deception are endemic" in international relations.<sup>7</sup> Anarchy, then, means that states may wish to cooperate, but, aware that cheating is both possible and profitable, *lack a central agency to enforce promises*. Given this understanding of anarchy, neoliberal institutional theory correctly identifies the problem of cheating and then proceeds to investigate how institutions can ameliorate that particular problem.

For realists, as for neoliberals, international anarchy means the absence of a common inter-state government. Yet, according to realists, states do not believe that the lack of a common government only means that no agency can reliably enforce promises. Instead, realists stress, states recognize that in anarchy, *there is no overarching authority to prevent others from using violence, or the threat of violence, to destroy or enslave them*. As Kenneth Waltz suggests, in anarchy, wars can occur "because there is nothing to prevent them," and therefore "in international politics force serves, not only as the *ultima ratio*, but indeed as the



first and constant one.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, some states may sometimes be driven by greed or ambition, but anarchy and the danger of war cause all states always to be motivated in some measure by fear and distrust.<sup>9</sup>

Given its understanding of anarchy, realism argues that individual well being is not the key interest of states; instead, it finds that *survival* is their core interest. Raymond Aron, for example, suggested that “politics, insofar as it concerns relations among states, seems to signify—in both ideal and objective terms—simply the survival of states confronting the potential threat created by the existence of other states.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Robert Gilpin observes that individuals and groups may seek truth, beauty, and justice, but he emphasizes that “all these more noble goals will be lost unless one makes provision for one’s security in the power struggle among groups.”<sup>11</sup>

Driven by an interest in survival, states are acutely sensitive to any erosion of their relative capabilities, which are the ultimate basis for their security and independence in an anarchical, self-help international context. Thus, realists find that the major goal of states in any relationship is not to attain the highest possible individual gain or payoff. Instead, *the fundamental goal of states in any relationship is to prevent others from achieving advances in their relative capabilities*. For example, E. H. Carr suggested that “the most serious wars are fought in order to make one’s own country militarily stronger or, *more often*, to prevent another from becoming militarily stronger.”<sup>12</sup> Along the same lines, Gilpin finds that the international system “stimulates, and may compel, a state to increase its power; at the least, it necessitates that the prudent state prevent relative increases in the power of competitor states.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, states may even forgo increases in their absolute capabilities if doing so prevents others from achieving even greater gains. This is because, as Waltz suggests, “the first concern of states is not to maximize power but to maintain their position in the system.”<sup>14</sup>

States seek to prevent increases in others’ relative capabilities. As a result, states always assess their performance in any relationship in terms of the performance of others.<sup>15</sup> Thus, I suggest that states are positional, not atomistic in character. Most significantly, *state positionality may constrain the willingness of states to cooperate*. States fear that their partners will achieve relatively greater gains; that, as a result, the partners will surge ahead of them in relative capabilities; and, finally, that their increasingly powerful partners in the present could become all the more formidable foes at some point in the future.<sup>16</sup>

State positionality, then, engenders a “relative gains problem” for cooperation. That is, a state will decline to join, will leave, or will sharply limit its commitment to a cooperative arrangement if it believes that partners are achieving, or are likely to achieve, relatively greater gains. It will eschew cooperation even though participation in the arrangement was providing it, or would have provided it, with large absolute gains. Moreover, a state concerned about relative gains may decline to cooperate even if it is confident that partners will keep their commitments to a joint arrangement. Indeed, if a state believed that a proposed arrangement would provide all parties absolute gains, but would also generate gains favoring partners, then greater certainty that partners would adhere to the terms of the arrangement would only accentuate its relative gains concerns. Thus, a state worried about relative gains might respond to greater certainty that partners would keep their promises with a lower, rather than a higher, willingness to cooperate . . .

## Notes

- 1 Major realist works include: E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London and New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964); Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th ed. (New York: Knopf, 1973); Raymond Aron, *International Relations: A Theory of Peace and War*, trans. Richard Howard and Annette Baker Fox (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, 1973); Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959); Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979); Robert Gilpin, *U.S. Power and the Multinational Corporation: The Political Economy of Foreign Direct Investment* (New York: Basic Books, 1975); and Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). This essay does not distinguish between realism and “neorealism,” because on crucial issues—the meaning of international anarchy, its effects on states, and the problem of cooperation—modern realists like Waltz and Gilpin are very much in accord with classical realists like Carr, Aron, and Morgenthau. For an alternative view, see Richard Ashley, “The Poverty of Neorealism,” in Robert O. Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 255–300.
- 2 Richard Rosecrance provided the insight that realism presents an essentially pessimistic view of the human condition: this is noted by Robert Gilpin, “The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism,” in Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and Its Critics*, p. 304. This pessimism in realist theory is most clearly evident in Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), especially pp. 187–203.
- 3 For functionalist international theory, see David Mitrany, *A Working Peace System* (Chicago: Quadrangle Press, 1966); see also Ernst B. Haas, *Beyond the Nation-State: Functionalism and International Organization* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1964). On neofunctionalism, see Haas, *The Uniting Of Europe: Political, Economic, and Social Forces, 1950–1957* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1958); Haas, “Technology, Pluralism, and the New Europe,” in Joseph S. Nye, Jr., ed., *International Regionalism* (Boston: Little Brown, 1968), pp. 149–76; and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “Comparing Common Markets: A Revised Neo-Functional Model,” in Leon N. Lindberg and Stuart A. Scheingold, eds., *Regional Integration: Theory and Research* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 192–231. On interdependence theory, see Richard C. Cooper, “Economic Interdependence and Foreign Policies in the 1970’s,” *World Politics* 24 (January 1972), pp. 158–81; Edward S. Morse, “The Transformation of Foreign Policies: Modernization, Interdependence, and Externalization,” *World Politics* 22 (April 1970), pp. 371–92; and Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977).
- 4 See Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Axelrod and Robert O. Keohane, “Achieving Cooperation Under Anarchy: Strategies and Institutions,” *World Politics* 38 (October 1985), pp. 226–54; Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984); Charles Lipson, “International Cooperation in Economic and Security Affairs,” *World Politics* 37 (October 1984), pp. 1–23; and Arthur Stein, “Coordination and Collaboration: Regimes in an Anarchic World,” in Stephen D. Krasner, ed., *International Regimes* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 115–40.
- 5 Axelrod and Keohane, “Achieving Cooperation,” p. 226; see also Keohane, *After Hegemony*, p. 7; Lipson, “International Cooperation,” pp. 1–2; Axelrod, *Evolution of Cooperation*, pp. 3–4; and Stein, “Coordination and Collaboration,” p. 116.
- 6 See Axelrod and Keohane, “Achieving Cooperation,” p. 226; Keohane, *After Hegemony*, p. 7; and Axelrod, *Evolution of Cooperation*, p. 6.
- 7 Axelrod and Keohane, “Achieving Cooperation,” p. 226. Similarly, Lipson notes that while institutionalized mechanisms (such as governments) that guarantee the enforcement of contracts are available in civil society, “the absence of reliable guarantees is an essential feature of international relations and a major obstacle to concluding treaties, contracts, and agreements.” The resulting problem, according to Lipson, is that “constraints on opportunism are weak.” See Lipson, “International Cooperation,” p. 4. Also see Keohane, *After Hegemony* p. 93, and Stein, “Coordination and Collaboration,” p. 116.
- 8 See Waltz, *Man, State, and War*, p. 232; and Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 113. Similarly, Carr suggests that war “lurks in the background of international politics just as revolution

lurks in the background of domestic politics.” See Carr, *Twenty Years Crisis*, p. 109. Finally, Aron observes that international relations “present one original feature which distinguishes them from all other social relations: they take place within the shadow of war.” See Aron, *Peace and War*, p. 6.

- 9 See Gilpin, “Political Realism,” pp. 304–5.
- 10 Aron, *Peace and War*, p. 7; also see pp. 64–65.
- 11 Gilpin, “Political Realism,” p. 305. Similarly, Waltz indicates that “in anarchy, security is the highest end. Only if survival is assured can states safely seek such other goals as tranquility, profit, and power.” See Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 126; also see pp. 91–92, and Waltz, “Reflections on Theory of International Politics: A Response to My Critics,” in Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and its Critics*, p. 334.
- 12 Carr, *Twenty Years Crisis*, p. 111, emphasis added.
- 13 Gilpin, *War and Change*, pp. 87–88.
- 14 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 126; see also Waltz, “Reflections,” p. 334.
- 15 On the tendency of states to compare performance levels, see Oran Young, “International Regimes: Toward a New Theory of Institutions,” *World Politics* 39 (October 1986), p. 118. Young suggests that realists assume that states are “status maximizers” and attribute to states the tendency to compare performance levels because each seeks “to attain the highest possible rank in the hierarchy of members of the international community.” The present writer offers a different understanding of realism: while realism acknowledges that *some* states may be positional in the sense noted by Young, its fundamental insight is that *all* states are positional and compare performance levels because they fear that *others* may attain a higher ranking in an issue-area.
- 16 As Waltz suggests, “When faced with the possibility of cooperating for mutual gains, states that feel insecure must ask how the gain will be divided. They are compelled to ask not “Will both of us gain?” but “Who will gain more?” If an expected gain is to be divided, say, in the ratio of two to one, one state may use its disproportionate gain to implement a policy intended to damage or destroy the other.” See Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 105.

# The false promise of international institutions

*John J. Mearsheimer*

From: *International Security* 19, no. 3 (Winter 1994): 5–49.

Since the Cold War ended, Western policymakers have sought to create security arrangements in Europe, as well as in other regions of the globe, that are based on international institutions. In doing so, they explicitly reject balance-of-power politics as an organizing concept for the post-Cold War world. During the 1992 presidential campaign, for example, President Clinton declared that, “in a world where freedom, not tyranny, is on the march, the cynical calculus of pure power politics simply does not compute. It is ill-suited to a new era.” Before taking office, Anthony Lake, the president’s national security adviser, criticized the Bush administration for viewing the world through a “classic balance of power prism,” whereas he and Mr. Clinton took a “more ‘neo-Wilsonian’ view.”<sup>1</sup>

This approach to international politics rests on the belief that institutions are a key means of promoting world peace.<sup>2</sup> In particular, Western policymakers claim that the institutions that “served the West well” before the Soviet Union collapsed must be reshaped to encompass Eastern Europe as well.<sup>3</sup> “There is no reason,” according to Secretary of State Warren Christopher, “why our institutions or our aspirations should stop at [the] old frontiers of the Cold War.”<sup>4</sup> The institutions he has in mind include the European Community (EC), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), and the Western European Union (WEU). No single institution is expected to play a dominating role in Europe, however; instead, the aim is to create “a framework of complementary, mutually reinforcing” institutions.<sup>5</sup> “We can promote more durable European security,” Christopher claims, “through interlocking structures, each with complementary roles and strengths.”<sup>6</sup> . . .

This article examines the claim that institutions push states away from war and promote peace. I concentrate on assessing the major international relations theories that employ institutions as a core concept: liberal institutionalism, collective security, and critical theory.<sup>7</sup> I begin, however, with a brief review of realism, because of the “institutionalist” theories is largely a response to realism, and each directly challenges realism’s underlying logic.<sup>8</sup> Realists and institutionalists particularly disagree about whether institutions markedly affect the prospects for international stability. Realists say no; institutionalists say yes. Realists maintain that institutions are basically a reflection of the distribution of power in the world. They are based on the self-interested calculations of the great powers, and they have no independent effect on state behavior. Realists therefore believe that institutions are not an important cause of peace. They matter only on the margins. Institutionalists directly challenge this view of institutions, arguing instead that institutions can alter state preferences and therefore change state behavior. Institutions can discourage states from calculating self-interest on the basis of how every move affects their relative power positions. Institutions are independent variables, and they have the capability to move states away from war.

Although institutionalists are united in their opposition to realist claims about institutions, each institutionalist theory makes a different argument about how institutions work to alter state behavior. My goal is to evaluate these three theories to determine whether the claim that institutions cause peace is persuasive. That task involves answering four questions: 1) What are institutions? 2) How do they work to cause peace? Specifically, what is the causal logic that underpins each theory? 3) Are these different logics that explain how institutions work compelling? 4) Does the evidence support these theories?

My central conclusion is that institutions have minimal influence on state behavior, and thus hold little promise for promoting stability in the post-Cold War world. The three theories on which the case for institutions is based are all flawed. Each has problems in its causal logic, and all three institutionalist theories find little support in the historical record . . .

### **What are institutions?**

There is no widely-agreed upon definition of institutions in the international relations literature.<sup>9</sup> The concept is sometimes defined so broadly as to encompass all of international relations, which gives it little analytical bite.<sup>10</sup> For example, defining institutions as “recognized patterns of behavior or practice around which expectations converge” allows the concept to cover almost every regularized pattern of activity between states, from war to tariff bindings negotiated under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), thus rendering it largely meaningless.<sup>11</sup> Still, it is possible to devise a useful definition that is consistent with how most institutionalist scholars employ the concept.

I define institutions as a set of rules that stipulate the ways in which states should cooperate and compete with each other.<sup>12</sup> They prescribe acceptable forms of state behavior, and proscribe unacceptable kinds of behavior. These rules are negotiated by states, and according to many prominent theorists, they entail the mutual acceptance of higher norms, which are “standards of behavior defined in terms of rights and obligations.”<sup>13</sup> These rules are typically formalized in international agreements, and are usually embodied in organizations with their own personnel and budgets.<sup>14</sup> Although rules are usually incorporated into a formal international organization, it is not the organization *per se* that compels states to obey the rules. Institutions are not a form of world government. States themselves must choose to obey the rules they created. Institutions, in short, call for the “decentralized cooperation of individual sovereign states, without any effective mechanism of command.”<sup>15</sup> . . .

### ***Cooperation in a realist world***

Although realism envisions a world that is fundamentally competitive, cooperation between states does occur. It is sometimes difficult to achieve, however, and always difficult to sustain. Two factors inhibit cooperation: relative-gains considerations, and concern about cheating.<sup>16</sup>

States contemplating cooperation must consider how the profits or gains will be distributed among them. They can think about the division in two different ways. They can think in terms of absolute gains, which means each side focuses on maximizing its own profit, and cares little about how much the other side gains or loses in the deal. Each side cares about the other only to the extent that the other side’s behavior affects its own prospects for achieving maximum profits. Alternately, states can think in terms of relative gains, which means each side not only considers its individual gain, but also how well it does compared to the other side.

Because states in a realist world are concerned about the balance of power, they must be motivated primarily by relative gains concerns when considering cooperation. While each state wants to maximize its absolute gains, it is more important to make sure that it does better, or at least no worse, than the other state in any agreement. However, cooperation is more difficult to achieve when states are attuned to relative-gains logic, rather than absolute-gains logic. This is because states concerned about absolute gains need only make sure that the pie is expanding and that they are getting at least some portion of the increase, while states that worry about relative gains must care also about how the pie is divided, which complicates cooperative efforts.

Concerns about cheating also hinder cooperation. States are often reluctant to enter into cooperative agreements for fear that the other side will cheat on the agreement and gain a relative advantage. There is a “special peril of defection” in the military realm, because the nature of military weaponry allows for rapid shifts in the balance of power. Such a development could create a window of opportunity for the cheating state to inflict a decisive defeat on the victim state.<sup>17</sup>

These barriers to cooperation notwithstanding, states do cooperate in a realist world. For example, balance-of-power logic often causes states to form alliances and cooperate against common enemies. States sometimes cooperate to gang up on a third state, as the Germans and the Soviets did against Poland in 1939.<sup>18</sup> Rivals as well as allies cooperate. After all, deals can be struck that roughly reflect the distribution of power, and satisfy concerns about cheating. The various arms control agreements signed by the superpowers during the Cold War illustrate this point.

The bottom line, however, is that cooperation takes place in a world that is competitive at its core—one where states have powerful incentives to take advantage of other states. This point is graphically highlighted by European politics in the forty years before World War I. There was much cooperation among the great powers during this period, but that did not stop them from going to war in 1914.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Institutions in a realist world***

Realists also recognize that states sometimes operate through institutions. However, they believe that those rules reflect state calculations of self-interest based primarily on the international distribution of power. The most powerful states in the system create and shape institutions so that they can maintain their share of world power, or even increase it. In this view, institutions are essentially “arenas for acting out power relationships.”<sup>20</sup> For realists, the causes of war and peace are mainly a function of the balance of power, and institutions largely mirror the distribution of power in the system. In short, the balance of power is the independent variable that explains war; institutions are merely an intervening variable in the process.

NATO provides a good example of realist thinking about institutions. NATO is an institution, and it certainly played a role in preventing World War III and helping the West win the Cold War. Nevertheless, NATO was basically a manifestation of the bipolar distribution of power in Europe during the Cold War, and it was that balance of power, not NATO *per se*, that provided the key to maintaining stability on the continent. NATO was essentially an American tool for managing power in the face of the Soviet threat. Now, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, realists argue that NATO must either disappear or reconstitute itself on the basis of the new distribution of power in Europe.<sup>21</sup> NATO cannot remain as it was during the Cold War . . .



## Varieties of institutionalist theories

### *Liberal institutionalism*

Liberal institutionalism does not directly address the question of whether institutions cause peace, but instead focuses on the less ambitious goal of explaining cooperation in cases where state interests are not fundamentally opposed.<sup>22</sup> Specifically, the theory looks at cases where states are having difficulty cooperating because they have “mixed” interests; in other words, each side has incentives both to cooperate and not to cooperate.<sup>23</sup> Each side can benefit from cooperation, however, which liberal institutionalists define as “goal-directed behavior that entails mutual policy adjustments so that all sides end up better off than they would otherwise be.”<sup>24</sup> The theory is of little relevance in situations where states’ interests are fundamentally conflictual and neither side thinks it has much to gain from cooperation. In these circumstances, states aim to gain advantage over each other. They think in terms of winning and losing, and this invariably leads to intense security competition, and sometimes war. But liberal institutionalism does not deal directly with these situations, and thus says little about how to resolve or even ameliorate them.

Therefore, the theory largely ignores security issues and concentrates instead on economic and, to a lesser extent, environmental issues.<sup>25</sup> In fact, the theory is built on the assumption that international politics can be divided into two realms—security and political economy—and that liberal institutionalism mainly applies to the latter, but not the former. This theme is clearly articulated by Charles Lipson, who writes that “significantly different institutional arrangements are associated with international economic and security issues.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the likelihood of cooperation is markedly different within these two realms: when economic relations are at stake, “cooperation can be sustained among several self-interested states,” whereas the prospects for cooperation are “more impoverished . . . in security affairs.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, the theory’s proponents pay little attention to the security realm, where questions about war and peace are of central importance.

Nevertheless, there are good reasons to examine liberal institutionalism closely. Liberal institutionalists sometimes assert that institutions are an important cause of international stability. Moreover, one might argue that if the theory shows a strong causal connection between institutions and economic cooperation, it would be relatively easy to take the next step and link cooperation with peace.<sup>28</sup> Some proponents of the theory maintain that institutions contribute to international stability; this suggests that they believe it is easy to connect cooperation and stability.<sup>29</sup> I doubt this claim, mainly because proponents of the theory define cooperation so narrowly as to avoid military issues. Let us assume, however, that liberal institutionalists are attempting to take a giant step toward developing a theory that explains how institutions push states away from war.

*Causal logic.* Liberal institutionalists claim to accept realism’s root assumptions while arguing that cooperation is nevertheless easier to achieve than realists recognize. Robert Keohane, for example, writes in *After Hegemony* that he is “adopting the realist model of rational egoism.” He continues: “I propose to show, on the basis of their own assumptions, that the characteristic pessimism of realism does not necessarily follow. I seek to demonstrate that realist assumptions about world politics are consistent with the formation of institutionalized arrangements . . . which promote cooperation.”<sup>30</sup> In particular, liberal institutionalists emphasize that states “dwell in perpetual anarchy,” and must therefore act as rational egoists in what is a self-help world.<sup>31</sup>

According to liberal institutionalists, the principal obstacle to cooperation among states

with mutual interests is the threat of cheating.<sup>32</sup> The famous “prisoners’ dilemma,” which is the analytical centerpiece of most of the liberal institutionalist literature, captures the essence of the problem that states must solve to achieve cooperation.<sup>33</sup> Each of two states can either cheat or cooperate with the other. Each side wants to maximize its own gain, but does not care about the size of the other side’s gain; each side cares about the other side only so far as the other side’s chosen strategy affects its own prospects for maximizing gain. The most attractive strategy for each state is to cheat and hope the other state pursues a cooperative strategy. In other words, a state’s ideal outcome is to “sucker” the other side into thinking it is going to cooperate, and then cheat. But both sides understand this logic, and therefore both sides will try to cheat the other. Consequently, both sides will end up worse off than if they had cooperated, since mutual cheating leads to the worst possible outcome. Even though mutual cooperation is not as attractive as suckering the other side, it is certainly better than the outcome when both sides cheat.

The key to solving this dilemma is for each side to convince the other that they have a collective interest in making what appear to be short-term sacrifices (the gain that might result from successful cheating) for the sake of long-term benefits (the substantial payoff from mutual long-term cooperation). This means convincing states to accept the second-best outcome, which is mutual collaboration. The principal obstacle to reaching this cooperative outcome will be fear of getting suckered, should the other side cheat. This, in a nutshell, is the problem that institutions must solve.

To deal with this problem of “political market failure,” institutions must deter cheaters and protect victims.<sup>34</sup> Three messages must be sent to potential cheaters: you will be caught, you will be punished immediately, and you will jeopardize future cooperative efforts. Potential victims, on the other hand, need early warning of cheating to avoid serious injury, and need the means to punish cheaters.

Liberal institutionalists do not aim to deal with cheaters and victims by changing fundamental norms of state behavior. Nor do they suggest transforming the anarchical nature of the international system. They accept the assumption that states operate in an anarchic environment and behave in a self-interested manner.<sup>35</sup> In this regard, their approach is less ambitious than collective security and critical theory, which aim to alter important international norms. Liberal institutionalists instead concentrate on showing how rules can work to counter the cheating problem, even while states seek to maximize their own welfare. They argue that institutions can change a state’s calculations about how to maximize gains. Specifically, rules can get states to make the short-term sacrifices needed to resolve the prisoners’ dilemma and thus to realize long-term gains. Institutions, in short, can produce cooperation.

Rules can ideally be employed to make four major changes in “the contractual environment.”<sup>36</sup> First, rules can increase the number of transactions between particular states over time.<sup>37</sup> This *institutionalized iteration* discourages cheating in three ways. It raises the costs of cheating by creating the prospect of future gains through cooperation, thereby invoking “the shadow of the future” to deter cheating today. A state caught cheating would jeopardize its prospects of benefiting from future cooperation, since the victim would probably retaliate. In addition, iteration gives the victim the opportunity to pay back the cheater: it allows for reciprocation, the tit-for-tat strategy, which works to punish cheaters and not allow them to get away with their transgression. Finally, it rewards states that develop a reputation for faithful adherence to agreements, and punishes states that acquire a reputation for cheating.<sup>38</sup>

Second, rules can tie together interactions between states in different issue areas.

*Issue-linkage* aims to create greater interdependence between states, who will then be reluctant to cheat in one issue area for fear that the victim—and perhaps other states as well—will retaliate in another issue area. It discourages cheating in much the same way as iteration: it raises the costs of cheating and provides a way for the victim to retaliate against the cheater.

Third, a structure of rules can increase the amount of *information* available to participants in cooperative agreements so that close monitoring is possible. Raising the level of information discourages cheating in two ways: it increases the likelihood that cheaters will be caught, and more importantly, it provides victims with early warning of cheating, thereby enabling them to take protective measures before they are badly hurt.

Fourth, rules can reduce the *transaction costs* of individual agreements.<sup>39</sup> When institutions perform the tasks described above, states can devote less effort to negotiating and monitoring cooperative agreements, and to hedging against possible defections. By increasing the efficiency of international cooperation, institutions make it more profitable and thus more attractive for self-interested states.

Liberal institutionalism is generally thought to be of limited utility in the security realm, because fear of cheating is considered a much greater obstacle to cooperation when military issues are at stake.<sup>40</sup> There is the constant threat that betrayal will result in a devastating military defeat. This threat of “swift, decisive defection” is simply not present when dealing with international economics. Given that “the costs of betrayal” are potentially much graver in the military than the economic sphere, states will be very reluctant to accept the “one step backward, two steps forward” logic which underpins the tit-for-tat strategy of conditional cooperation. One step backward in the security realm might mean destruction, in which case there will be no next step—backward or forward.<sup>41</sup>

*Flaws in the causal logic.* There is an important theoretical failing in the liberal institutionalist logic, even as it applies to economic issues. The theory is correct as far as it goes: cheating can be a serious barrier to cooperation. It ignores, however, the other major obstacle to cooperation: relative-gains concerns. As Joseph Grieco has shown, liberal institutionalists assume that states are not concerned about relative gains, but focus exclusively on absolute gains.<sup>42</sup> Keohane acknowledged this problem in 1993: “Grieco has made a significant contribution by focusing attention on the issue of relative gains, a subject that has been underemphasized, especially by liberal or neoliberal commentators on the world economy.”<sup>43</sup>

This oversight is revealed by the assumed order of preference in the prisoners’ dilemma game: each state cares about how its opponent’s strategy will affect its own (absolute) gains, but not about how much one side gains relative to the other. In other words, each side simply wants to get the best deal for itself, and does not pay attention to how well the other side fares in the process.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, liberal institutionalists cannot ignore relative-gains considerations, because they assume that states are self-interested actors in an anarchic system, and they recognize that military power matters to states. A theory that explicitly accepts realism’s core assumptions—and liberal institutionalism does that—must confront the issue of relative gains if it hopes to develop a sound explanation for why states cooperate.

One might expect liberal institutionalists to offer the counterargument that relative gains logic applies only to the security realm, while absolute-gains logic applies to the economic realm. Given that they are mainly concerned with explaining economic and environmental cooperation, leaving relative-gains concerns out of the theory does not matter.

There are two problems with this argument. First, if cheating were the only significant

obstacle to cooperation, liberal institutionalists could argue that their theory applies to the economic, but not the military realm. In fact, they do make that argument. However, once relative-gains considerations are factored into the equation, it becomes impossible to maintain the neat dividing line between economic and military issues, mainly because military might is significantly dependent on economic might. The relative size of a state's economy has profound consequences for its standing in the international balance of military power. Therefore, relative-gains concerns must be taken into account for security reasons when looking at the economic as well as military domain. The neat dividing line that liberal institutionalists employ to specify when their theory applies has little utility when one accepts that states worry about relative gains.<sup>45</sup>

Second, there are non-realist (i.e., non-security) logics that might explain why states worry about relative gains. Strategic trade theory; for example, provides a straightforward economic logic for why states should care about relative gains.<sup>46</sup> It argues that states should help their own firms gain comparative advantage over the firms of rival states, because that is the best way to insure national economic prosperity. There is also a psychological logic, which portrays individuals as caring about how well they do (or their state does) in a cooperative agreement, not for material reasons, but because it is human nature to compare one's progress with that of others.<sup>47</sup>

Another possible liberal institutionalist counterargument is that solving the cheating problem renders the relative-gains problem irrelevant. If states cannot cheat each other, they need not fear each other, and therefore, states would not have to worry about relative power. The problem with this argument, however, is that even if the cheating problem were solved, states would still have to worry about relative gains because gaps in gains can be translated into military advantage that can be used for coercion or aggression. And in the international system, states sometimes have conflicting interests that lead to aggression . . .

*Problems with the empirical record.* Although there is much evidence of cooperation among states, this alone does not constitute support for liberal institutionalism. What is needed is evidence of cooperation that would not have occurred in the absence of institutions because of fear of cheating, or its actual presence. But scholars have provided little evidence of cooperation of that sort, nor of cooperation failing because of cheating. Moreover, as discussed above, there is considerable evidence that states worry much about relative gains not only in security matters, but in the economic realm as well.

This dearth of empirical support for liberal institutionalism is acknowledged by proponents of that theory.<sup>48</sup> The empirical record is not completely blank, however, but the few historical cases that liberal institutionalists have studied provide scant support for the theory. Consider two prominent examples.

Keohane looked at the performance of the International Energy Agency (IEA) in 1974–81, a period that included the 1979 oil crisis.<sup>49</sup> This case does not appear to lend the theory much support. First, Keohane concedes that the IEA failed outright when put to the test in 1979: “regime-oriented efforts at cooperation do not always succeed, as the fiasco of IEA actions in 1979 illustrates.”<sup>50</sup> He claims, however, that in 1980 the IEA had a minor success “under relatively favorable conditions” in responding to the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq War. Although he admits it is difficult to specify how much the IEA mattered in the 1980 case, he notes that “it seems clear that ‘it [the IEA] leaned in the right direction’,” a claim that hardly constitutes strong support for the theory.<sup>51</sup> Second, it does not appear from Keohane's analysis that either fear of cheating or actual cheating hindered cooperation in the 1979 case, as the theory would predict. Third, Keohane chose the IEA case precisely because it involved relations among advanced Western democracies with market economies, where

the prospects for cooperation were excellent.<sup>52</sup> The modest impact of institutions in this case is thus all the more damping to the theory.

Lisa Martin examined the role that the European Community (EC) played during the Falklands War in helping Britain coax its reluctant allies to continue economic sanctions against Argentina after military action started.<sup>53</sup> She concludes that the EC helped Britain win its allies' cooperation by lowering transaction costs and facilitating issue linkage. Specifically, Britain made concessions on the EC budget and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP); Britain's allies agreed in return to keep sanctions on Argentina.

This case, too, is less than a ringing endorsement for liberal institutionalism. First, British efforts to maintain EC sanctions against Argentina were not impeded by fears of possible cheating which the theory identifies as the central impediment to cooperation. So this case does not present an important test of liberal institutionalism, and thus the cooperative outcome does not tell us much about the theory's explanatory power. Second, it was relatively easy for Britain and her allies to strike a deal in this case. Neither side's core interests were threatened, and neither side had to make significant sacrifices to reach an agreement. Forging an accord to continue sanctions was not a difficult undertaking. A stronger test for liberal institutionalism would require states to cooperate when doing so entailed significant costs and risks. Third, the EC was not essential to an agreement. Issues could have been linked without the EC, and although the EC may have lowered transaction costs somewhat, there is no reason to think these costs were a serious impediment to striking a deal.<sup>54</sup> It is noteworthy that Britain and America were able to cooperate during the Falklands War, even though the United States did not belong to the EC.

There is also evidence that directly challenges liberal institutionalism in issue areas where one would expect the theory to operate successfully. The studies discussed above by Grieco, Krasner, and Mastanduno test the institutionalist argument in a number of different political economy cases, and each finds the theory has little explanatory power. More empirical work is needed before a final judgment is rendered on the explanatory power of liberal institutionalism. Nevertheless, the evidence gathered so far is unpromising at best.

In summary, liberal institutionalism does not provide a sound basis for understanding international relations and promoting stability in the post-Cold War world. It makes modest claims about the impact of institutions, and steers clear of war and peace issues, focusing instead on the less ambitious task of explaining economic cooperation. Furthermore, the theory's causal logic is flawed, as proponents of the theory now admit. Having overlooked the relative-gains problem, they are now attempting to repair the theory, but their initial efforts are not promising. Finally, the available empirical evidence provides little support for the theory . . .

## Notes

- 1 Bill Clinton, "American Foreign Policy and the Democratic Ideal" Campaign speech, Pabst Theater, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, October 1, 1992; Steven A Holmes, "Choice for National Security Adviser Has a Long-Awaited Chance to Lead," *New York Times*, January 3, 1993.
- 2 The other prominent theme in Western policymaking circles is the importance of spreading democracy and capitalism across the globe. Prosperous democracies, so the argument goes, do not fight each other. Thus, the aim is to increase the number of stable democracies in the international system. This line of argument is not examined here. For conciseness, international institutions are henceforth referred to simply as institutions.
- 3 Douglas Hurd, "A New System of Security in Europe," Speech to the Diplomatic and Commonwealth Writers' Association, London, June 2, 1992. Hurd, the British Foreign Secretary, said in



this speech: "We have in Western Europe, in the West as a whole, a set of international institutions which have proved their worth for one set of problems—the problems for which they were set up, and now have to be adapted for another. That is the key, the necessary changes in all these institutions are the key to getting the right help, the right reassurance to the countries of central and Eastern Europe." Even Margaret Thatcher, with all her reservations about European institutions, has adopted this theme. She argued days after Iraq invaded Kuwait that, "We must bring the new democracies of Eastern Europe into closer association with the institutions of Western Europe. . . . The European Community has reconciled antagonisms within Western Europe; it should now help to overcome divisions between East and West in Europe." Margaret Thatcher, "Shaping A New Global Community," Speech to the Aspen Institute, Aspen, Colorado, August 5, 1990.

- 4 Warren Christopher, "Toward a More Integrated World," Statement at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Ministerial Meeting, Paris, June 8, 1994. President Clinton and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl share the same view, as Clinton made clear when describing his private talks with Kohl in July 1994: "We know from our experience how half of Europe was integrated through NATO and other institutions that built stability after World War II. At the heart of our discussion today was what we have to do to integrate Europe's other half, the new independent nations." Thomas L. Friedman, "Clinton Sees Germany as Main Partner of the U.S. in Europe," *New York Times*, July 12, 1994.
- 5 "Interlocking Institutions: The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE)," NATO Basic Fact Sheet No.6 (Brussels, June 1994). Also see Jacques Delors, "European Unification and European Security," in *European Security after the Cold War*, Part I, Adelphi Paper No. 284 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS], January 1994), pp. 3–14.
- 6 Warren Christopher, "The CSCE Vision: European Security Rooted in Shared Values," Statement to the Plenary Session of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, Rome, November 30, 1993.
- 7 Prescriptions about how best to maintain peace should rest on general theories about the causes of war and peace. This point is true for both academics and policymakers. Although policymakers are seldom self-conscious in their use of theory, their views about institutions are nevertheless shaped by their implicit preferences for one theory of international relations over another.
- 8 Keohane, for example, writes, "Institutionalist thinking has focused its critical fire on realism." Robert O. Keohane, "Institutional Theory and the Realist Challenge After the Cold War," in David A. Baldwin, ed., *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 271.
- 9 Regimes and institutions are treated as synonymous concepts in this article. They are also used interchangeably in the institutionalist literature. See Robert O. Keohane, "International Institutions: Two Approaches," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No.4 (December 1988), p. 384; Robert O. Keohane, *International Institutions and State Power: Essays in International Relations Theory* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1989), pp. 3–4; and Oran R. Young, *International Cooperation: Building Regimes for Natural Resources and the Environment* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), chaps. 1 and 8. The term "multilateralism" is also virtually synonymous with institutions. To quote John Ruggie, "the term 'multilateral' is an adjective that modifies the noun 'institution.' Thus, multilateralism depicts a *generic institutional form* in international relations. . . . [Specifically,] multilateralism is an institutional form which coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of 'generalized' principles of conduct." Ruggie, "Multilateralism," pp. 570–571.
- 10 For discussion of this point, see Arthur A. Stein, *Why Nations Cooperate: Circumstance and Choice in International Relations* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 25–27. Also see Susan Strange, "Cave! Hic Dragones: A Critique of Regime Analysis," in Stephen D. Krasner, ed., *International Regimes*, special issue of *International Organization*, Vol. 36, No.2 (Spring 1982), pp. 479–496.
- 11 Oran R. Young, "Regime Dynamics: The Rise and Fall of International Regimes," in Krasner, *International Regimes*, p. 277.
- 12 See Douglass C. North and Robert P. Thomas, "An Economic Theory of the Growth of the Western World," *The Economic History Review*, 2nd series, Vol. 23, No.1 (April 1970), p. 5.
- 13 Krasner, *International Regimes*, p. 186. Non-realist institutions are often based on higher norms, while few, if any, realist institutions are based on norms. The dividing line between norms and rules



is not sharply defined in the institutionalist literature. See Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 57–58. For example, one might argue that rules, not just norms, are concerned with rights and obligations. The key point, however, is that for many institutionalists, norms, which are core beliefs about standards of appropriate state behavior, are the foundation on which more specific rules are constructed. This distinction between norms and rules applies in a rather straightforward way in the subsequent discussion. Both collective security and critical theory challenge the realist belief that states behave in a self-interested way, and argue instead for developing norms that require states to act more altruistically. Liberal institutionalism, on the other hand, accepts the realist view that states act on the basis of self-interest, and concentrates on devising rules that facilitate cooperation among states.

- 14 International organizations are public agencies established through the cooperative efforts of two or more states. These administrative structures have their own budget, personnel, and buildings. John Ruggie defines them as “palpable entities with headquarters and letterheads, voting procedures, and generous pension plans.” Ruggie, “Multilateralism,” p. 573. Once rules are incorporated into an international organization, “they may seem almost coterminous,” even though they are “distinguishable analytically.” Keohane, *International Institutions and State Power*, p. 5.
- 15 Charles Lipson, “Is the Future of Collective Security Like the Past?” in George W. Downs, ed., *Collective Security beyond the Cold War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), p. 114.
- 16 See Joseph M. Grieco, “Anarchy and the limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism,” *International Organization*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Summer 1988), pp. 498–500.
- 17 Lipson, “International Cooperation,” p. 14.
- 18 Randall L. Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In,” *International Security*, Vol. 19, No.1 (Summer 1994), pp. 72–107.
- 19 See John Maynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), chap. 2; and J.M. Roberts, *Europe, 1880–1945* (London: Longman, 1970), pp. 239–241. There was also significant cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union during World War II, but that cooperation did not prevent the outbreak of the Cold War shortly after Germany and Japan were defeated.
- 20 Tony Evans and Peter Wilson, “Regime Theory and the English School of International Relations: A Comparison,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 21, No.3 (Winter 1992), p. 330.
- 21 See Gunther Hellmann and Reinhard Wolf, “Neorealism, Neoliberal Institutionalism, and the Future of NATO,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 3, No.1 (Autumn 1993), pp. 3–43.
- 22 Among the key liberal institutionalist works are: Robert Axelrod and Robert O. Keohane, “Achieving Cooperation under Anarchy: Strategies and Institutions,” *World Politics*, Vol. 38, No.1 (October 1985), pp. 226–254; Keohane, *After Hegemony*; Keohane, “International Institutions: Two Approaches,” pp. 379–396; Keohane, *International Institutions and State Power*, chap. 1; Charles Lipson, “International Cooperation in Economic and Security Affairs,” *World Politics*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (October 1984), pp. 1–23; Lisa L. Martin, “Institutions and Cooperation: Sanctions During the Falkland Islands Conflict,” *International Security*, Vol. 16, No.4 (Spring 1992), pp. 143–178; Lisa L. Martin, *Coercive Cooperation: Explaining Multilateral Economic Sanctions* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992); Kenneth A. Oye, “Explaining Cooperation Under Anarchy: Hypotheses and Strategies,” *World Politics*, Vol. 38, No.1 (October 1985), pp. 1–24; and Stein, *Why Nations Cooperate*.
- 23 Stein, *Why Nations Cooperate*, chap. 2. Also see Keohane, *After Hegemony*, pp. 6–7, 12–13, 67–69.
- 24 Helen Milner, “International Theories of Cooperation among Nations: Strengths and Weaknesses,” *World Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (April 1992), p. 468.
- 25 For examples of the theory at work in the environmental realm, see Peter M. Haas, Robert O. Keohane, and Marc A. Levy, eds., *Institutions for the Earth: Sources of Effective International Environmental Protection* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), especially chaps. 1 and 9. Some of the most important work on institutions and the environment has been done by Oran Young. See, for example, Young, *International Cooperation*. The rest of my discussion concentrates on economic, not environmental issues, for conciseness, and also because the key theoretical works in the liberal institutionalist literature focus on economic rather than environmental matters.
- 26 Lipson, “International Cooperation,” pp. 2, 12. Also see Axelrod and Keohane, “Achieving Cooperation Under Anarchy,” pp. 232–233; and Keohane, *After Hegemony*, pp. 39–41.

- 27 Lipson, "International Cooperation," p. 18.
- 28 I have suggested a possible line of argument in John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No.1 (Summer 1990), pp. 42–44. Also, Charles Glaser makes the connection between cooperation and peace in "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No.3 (Winter 1994/95), pp. 50–90.
- 29 Liberal institutionalists assume that cooperation is a positive goal, although they recognize it has a downside as well. See Keohane, *After Hegemony*, pp. 10–11, 247–257; and Keohane, "International Institutions: Two Approaches," p. 393. The virtues and vices of cooperation are not explored in any detail in the liberal institutionalist literature.
- 30 Keohane, *After Hegemony*, p. 67; also see p. 29. Similarly, Arthur Stein claims that, "Despite the different conclusions that they draw about the cooperative or conflictual nature of international politics, realism and liberalism share core assumptions." Stein, *Why Nations Cooperate*, p. 8.
- 31 Oye, "Explaining Cooperation Under Anarchy," p. 1.
- 32 Cheating is basically a "breach of promise." Oye, "Explaining Cooperation Under Anarchy," p. 1. It usually implies unobserved non-compliance, although there can be observed cheating as well. Defection is a synonym for cheating in the institutionalist literature.
- 33 The centrality of the prisoners' dilemma and cheating to the liberal institutionalist literature is clearly reflected in virtually all the works cited in footnote [22]. As Helen Milner notes in her review essay on this literature: "The focus is primarily on the role of regimes [institutions] in solving the defection [cheating] problem." Milner, "International Theories of Cooperation," p. 475.
- 34 The phrase is from Keohane, *After Hegemony*, p. 85.
- 35 Kenneth Oye, for example, writes in the introduction to an issue of *World Politics* containing a number of liberal institutionalist essays: "Our focus is on non-altruistic cooperation among states dwelling in international anarchy." Oye, "Explaining Cooperation Under Anarchy," p. 2. Also see Keohane, "International Institutions: Two Approaches," pp. 380–381; and Keohane, *International Institutions and State Power*, p. 3.
- 36 Haas, Keohane, and Levy, *Institutions for the Earth*, p. 11. For general discussions of how rules work, which inform my subsequent discussion of the matter, see Keohane, *After Hegemony*, chaps. 5–6; Martin, "Institutions and Cooperation," pp. 143–178; and Milner, "International Theories of Cooperation," pp. 474–478.
- 37 See Axelrod and Keohane, "Achieving Cooperation Under Anarchy," pp. 248–250; Lipson, "International Cooperation," pp. 4–18.
- 38 Lipson, "International Cooperation," p. 5.
- 39 See Keohane, *After Hegemony*, pp. 89–92.
- 40 This point is clearly articulated in Lipson, "International Cooperation," especially pp. 12–18. The subsequent quotations in this paragraph are from *ibid.* Also see Axelrod and Keohane, "Achieving Cooperation Under Anarchy," pp. 232–233.
- 41 See Roger B. Parks, "What if 'Fools Die'? A Comment on Axelrod," Letter to *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 79, No.4 (December 1985), pp. 1173–1174.
- 42 See Grieco, "Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation." Other works by Grieco bearing on the subject include: Joseph M. Grieco, "Realist Theory and the Problem of International Cooperation: Analysis with an Amended Prisoner's Dilemma Model," *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 50, No.3 (August 1988), pp. 600–624; Grieco, *Cooperation among Nations: Europe, America, and Non-Tariff Barriers to Trade* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990); and Grieco, "Understanding the Problem of International Cooperation: The Limits of Neoliberal Institutionalism and the Future of Realist Theory," in Baldwin, *Neorealism and Neoliberalism*, pp. 301–338. The telling effect of Grieco's criticism is reflected in *ibid.*, which is essentially organized around the relative gains vs. absolute gains debate, an issue given little attention before Grieco raised it in his widely cited 1988 article. The matter was briefly discussed by two other scholars before Grieco. See Joanne Gowa, "Anarchy, Egoism, and Third Images: *The Evolution of Cooperation and International Relations*," *International Organization*, Vol. 40, No.1 (Winter 1986), pp. 172–179; and Oran R. Young, "International Regimes: Toward a New Theory of Institutions," *World Politics*, Vol. 39, No.1 (October 1986), pp. 118–119.
- 43 Robert O. Keohane, "Institutional Theory and the Realist Challenge," in Baldwin, *Neorealism and Neoliberalism*, p. 283. When liberal institutionalists developed their theory in the mid-1980s, they did not explicitly assume that states pursue absolute gains. There is actually little evidence that they

thought much about the distinction between relative gains and absolute gains. However, the assumption that states pursue absolute but not relative gains is implicit in their writings.

- 44 Lipson writes: "The Prisoner's Dilemma, in its simplest form, involves two players. Each is assumed to be a self-interested, self-reliant maximizer of his own utility, an assumption that clearly parallels the Realist conception of sovereign states in international politics." Lipson, "International Cooperation," p. 2. Realists, however, do not accept this conception of international politics and, not surprisingly, have questioned the relevance of the prisoners' dilemma (at least in its common form) for explaining much of international relations. See Gowa, "Anarchy, Egoism, and Third Images"; Grieco, "Realist Theory and the Problem of International Cooperation"; and Stephen D. Krasner, "Global Communications and National Power: Life on the Pareto Frontier," *World Politics*, Vol. 43, No.3 (April 1991), pp. 336–366.
- 45 My thinking on this matter has been markedly influenced by Sean Lynn-Jones, in his June 19, 1994, correspondence with me.
- 46 For a short discussion of strategic trade theory, see Robert Gilpin, *The Political Economy of International Relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 215–221. The most commonly cited reference on the subject is Paul R. Krugman, ed., *Strategic Trade Policy and the New International Economics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986).
- 47 See Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), pp. 110–113.
- 48 For example, Lisa Martin writes that "scholars working in the realist tradition maintain a well-founded skepticism about the empirical impact of institutional factors on state behavior. This skepticism is grounded in a lack of studies that show precisely how and when institutions have constrained state decision-making." According to Oran Young, "One of the more surprising features of the emerging literature on regimes [institutions] is the relative absence of sustained discussions of the significance of . . . institutions, as determinants of collective outcomes at the international level." Martin, "Institutions and Cooperation," p. 144; Young, *International Cooperation*, p. 206.
- 49 Keohane, *After Hegemony*, chap. 10.
- 50 Ibid., p. 16.
- 51 Ibid., p. 236. A U.S. Department of Energy review of the IEA's performance in the 1980 crisis concluded that it had "failed to fulfill its promise." Ethan B. Kapstein, *The Insecure Alliance: Energy Crises and Western Politics Since 1944* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 198.
- 52 Keohane, *After Hegemony*, p. 7.
- 53 Martin, "Institutions and Cooperation." Martin looks closely at three other cases in *Coercive Cooperation* to determine the effect of institutions on cooperation. I have concentrated on the Falklands War case, however, because it is, by her own admission, her strongest case. See *ibid.*, p. 96.
- 54 Martin does not claim that agreement would not have been possible without the EC. Indeed, she appears to concede that even without the EC, Britain still could have fashioned "separate bilateral agreements with each EEC member in order to gain its cooperation, [although] this would have involved much higher transaction costs." Martin, "Institutions and Cooperation," pp. 174–175. However, transaction costs among the advanced industrial democracies are not very high in an era of rapid communications and permanent diplomatic establishments.

## 11 Engaging the constructivist and English School critiques

Although the liberal and institutionalist critiques reviewed in the previous chapters pose formidable challenges to the realist tradition, they do so while largely sharing its materialist and rationalist foundations. In contrast, by bringing in normative and ideational considerations, constructivism and the English School both present broader-based critiques.

Although they developed in partial isolation from each other, constructivism and the English School partially overlap. These approaches maintain that states can alter the nature of their social interactions, and hence rise above the malign effects of anarchy. In part by working within the framework of an international society, states can avoid having to live in a self-help world.

Constructivism and the English School begin from a similar position to other approaches by asserting that the international system is anarchic, in the sense that there is no central authority to police the behavior of states. Where they differ from other approaches is on the consequences of anarchy, suggesting that it is not inevitable that states must subsist in constant competition and conflict. For social constructivists, anarchy has no given meaning. The consequences of life without a central governing body, whether good or bad, are the product of the intersubjective meanings that follow from state interactions. If states behave poorly towards one another, then life in the international system will live down to realism's pessimism. But if states instead interact in a more cordial manner, acting as friends instead of enemies, life can be more pleasant than realist understandings allow. Similarly, proponents of the English School insist that, while no central authority exists to govern the international system, states nevertheless operate within an international society where their behavior is constrained and informed by an established set of laws and norms.

Because pessimism encourages suspicion and mutual fear, both constructivists and proponents of the English School would argue that realist arguments help to create the problems they are supposed to address. If this is so, then a way out of the realist problematique is to get states to stop thinking and behaving like realists.

Realists view these sentiments as being irretrievably utopian and naive. States fear because of the very serious damage they can do to each other. Today's friend could easily become tomorrow's enemy, and there is no international law or intersubjective meaning that can eliminate this anxiety. Knowing this, states worry about each other, and hence have little choice but to actively engage in self-help behavior.

The readings selected for this chapter show how social constructivists and English School scholars break with realists on matters related to anarchy, state behavior, and life in the international system. The first selection comes from Alexander Wendt's seminal article "Anarchy is what states make of it." Wendt is a leading figure in the development of constructivism as an approach to international relations. In this article, he claims that

self-help behavior is not a natural feature or an inevitable consequence of anarchy. Self-help is one kind of institution (defined by Wendt as a set of interests and identities) that can form when states interact, but it is not the only one. If states treat each other with suspicion and fear, then they will acquire selfish identities and interests, and actively engage in competition for security, power, or both. If, however, they choose to interact in a mutually accommodating fashion, they will acquire identities as friends, and the need to compete with each other will be greatly lessened if not completely eliminated.

In his article "Culture clash," Michael Desch defends the realist position and questions the empirical worth of theories that focus on ideas and norms, rather than material capabilities. While Desch finds some value in what he calls "cultural" theories, he maintains that arguments about the causal importance of non-material variables, like identities and norms, have not been put to a serious test. Culturalists, he insists, have chosen easy cases—those that are most likely to support their theories—to substantiate their claims about the importance of ideational factors over material ones. When confronted with more challenging cases, Desch argues that cultural theories do not fare as well as realist ones that emphasize material power.

In a selection from his article "The English School vs. American realism," Richard Little identifies the English School as a natural descendant of classical realism, but acknowledges that the approach lacks much in common with more modern forms of realism. The English School maintains that states live and operate within an international society, where their behavior is regulated by international law and societal norms. Given that states are bound by, and committed to, these rules, they have little reason to fear each other. Thus, the self-help behavior that characterizes life in the international system for most realists is absent in the English School's conception of the international society.

In a response to Little's article, Dale Copeland characterizes the English School as being naive of the security concerns that often prevent states from cooperating with each other. According to Copeland, the English School has done a poor job of explaining how international society helps to reduce the uncertainty that states have about the future intentions of their peers. Copeland claims that, as a consequence of this ambiguity, the school cannot explain fluctuations in cooperation and conflict over time. Given that most realists fully incorporate uncertainty into their theories, Copeland insists that the realist approach is better able to explain modern international relations than is the English School.

# Anarchy is what states make of it

## The social construction of power politics

*Alexander Wendt*

From: *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (Spring 1992).

The debate between realists and liberals has reemerged as an axis of contention in international relations theory.<sup>1</sup> Revolving in the past around competing theories of human nature, the debate is more concerned today with the extent to which state action is influenced by “structure” (anarchy and the distribution of power) versus “process” (interaction and learning) and institutions. Does the absence of centralized political authority force states to play competitive power politics? Can international regimes overcome this logic, and under what conditions? What in anarchy is given and immutable, and what is amenable to change? . . .

My objective in this article is to build a bridge between these two traditions (and, by extension, between the realist–liberal and rationalist–reflectivist debates) by developing a constructivist argument, drawn from structurationist and symbolic interactionist sociology, on behalf of the liberal claim that international institutions can transform state identities and interests.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to the “economic” theorizing that dominates mainstream systemic international relations scholarship, this involves a “sociological social psychological” form of systemic theory in which identities and interests are the dependent variable.<sup>3</sup> Whether a “communitarian liberalism” is still liberalism does not interest me here. What does is that constructivism might contribute significantly to the strong liberal interest in identity- and interest-formation and thereby perhaps itself be enriched with liberal insights about learning and cognition which it has neglected.

My strategy for building this bridge will be to argue against the neorealist claim that self-help is given by anarchic structure exogenously to process. Constructivists have not done a good job of taking the causal powers of anarchy seriously. This is unfortunate, since in the realist view anarchy justifies disinterest in the institutional transformation of identities and interests and thus building systemic theories in exclusively rationalist terms; its putative causal powers must be challenged if process and institutions are not to be subordinated to structure. I argue that self-help and power politics do not follow either logically or causally from anarchy and that if today we find ourselves in a self-help world, this is due to process, not structure. There is no “logic” of anarchy apart from the practices that create and instantiate one structure of identities and interests rather than another; structure has no existence or causal powers apart from process. Self-help and power politics are institutions, not essential features of anarchy. *Anarchy is what states make of it* . . .



### **Anarchy, self-help, and intersubjective knowledge**

Waltz defines political structure on three dimensions: ordering principles (in this case, anarchy), principles of differentiation (which here drop out), and the distribution of capabilities.<sup>4</sup> By itself, this definition predicts little about state behavior. It does not predict whether two states will be friends or foes, will recognize each other's sovereignty, will have dynastic ties, will be revisionist or status quo powers, and so on. These factors, which are fundamentally intersubjective, affect states' security interests and thus the character of their interaction under anarchy. In an important revision of Waltz's theory, Stephen Walt implies as much when he argues that the "balance of threats," rather than the balance of power, determines state action, threats being socially constructed.<sup>5</sup> Put more generally, without assumptions about the structure of identities and interests in the system, Waltz's definition of structure cannot predict the content or dynamics of anarchy. Self-help is one such intersubjective structure and, as such, does the decisive explanatory work in the theory. The question is whether self-help is a logical or contingent feature of anarchy. In this section, I develop the concept of a "structure of identity and interest" and show that no particular one follows logically from anarchy.

A fundamental principle of constructivist social theory is that people act toward objects, including other actors, on the basis of the meanings that the objects have for them.<sup>6</sup> States act differently toward enemies than they do toward friends because enemies are threatening and friends are not. Anarchy and the distribution of power are insufficient to tell us which is which. U.S. military power has a different significance for Canada than for Cuba, despite their similar "structural" positions, just as British missiles have a different significance for the United States than do Soviet missiles. The distribution of power may always affect states' calculations, but how it does so depends on the intersubjective understandings and expectations, on the "distribution of knowledge," that constitute their conceptions of self and other.<sup>7</sup> If society "forgets" what a university is, the powers and practices of professor and student cease to exist; if the United States and Soviet Union decide that they are no longer enemies, "the cold war is over." It is collective meanings that constitute the structures which organize our actions.

Actors acquire identities—relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self—by participating in such collective meanings.<sup>8</sup> Identities are inherently relational: "Identity, with its appropriate attachments of psychological reality, is always identity within a specific, socially constructed world," Peter Berger argues.<sup>9</sup> Each person has many identities linked to institutional roles, such as brother, son, teacher, and citizen. Similarly, a state may have multiple identities as "sovereign," "leader of the free world," "imperial power," and so on.<sup>10</sup> The commitment to and the salience of particular identities vary, but each identity is an inherently social definition of the actor grounded in the theories which actors collectively hold about themselves and one another and which constitute the structure of the social world.

Identities are the basis of interests. Actors do not have a "portfolio" of interests that they carry around independent of social context; instead, they define their interests in the process of defining situations.<sup>11</sup> As Nelson Foote puts it: "Motivation . . . refer[s] to the degree to which a human being, as a participant in the ongoing social process in which he necessarily finds himself, defines a problematic situation as calling for the performance of a particular act, with more or less anticipated consummations and consequences, and thereby his organism releases the energy appropriate to performing it."<sup>12</sup> Sometimes situations are unprecedented in our experience, and in these cases we have to construct their meaning, and

thus our interests, by analogy or invent them *de novo*. More often they have routine qualities in which we assign meanings on the basis of institutionally defined roles. When we say that professors have an “interest” in teaching, research, or going on leave, we are saying that to function in the role identity of “professor,” they have to define certain situations as calling for certain actions. This does not mean that they will necessarily do so (expectations and competence do not equal performance), but if they do not, they will not get tenure. The absence or failure of roles makes defining situations and interests more difficult, and identity confusion may result. This seems to be happening today in the United States and the former Soviet Union: without the cold war’s mutual attributions of threat and hostility to define their identities, these states seem unsure of what their “interests” should be.

An institution is a relatively stable set or “structure” of identities and interests. Such structures are often codified in formal rules and norms, but these have motivational force only in virtue of actors’ socialization to and participation in collective knowledge. Institutions are fundamentally cognitive entities that do not exist apart from actors’ ideas about how the world works.<sup>13</sup> This does not mean that institutions are not real or objective, that they are “nothing but” beliefs. As collective knowledge, they are experienced as having an existence “over and above the individuals who happen to embody them at the moment.”<sup>14</sup> In this way, institutions come to confront individuals as more or less coercive social facts, but they are still a function of what actors collectively “know.” Identities and such collective cognitions do not exist apart from each other; they are “mutually constitutive.”<sup>15</sup> On this view, institutionalization is a process of internalizing new identities and interests, not something occurring outside them and affecting only behavior; socialization is a cognitive process, not just a behavioral one. Conceived in this way, institutions may be cooperative or conflictual, a point sometimes lost in scholarship on international regimes, which tends to equate institutions with cooperation. There are important differences between conflictual and cooperative institutions to be sure, but all relatively stable self–other relations—even those of “enemies”—are defined intersubjectively.

Self-help is an institution, one of various structures of identity and interest that may exist under anarchy. Processes of identity-formation under anarchy are concerned first and foremost with preservation or “security” of the self. Concepts of security therefore differ in the extent to which and the manner in which the self is identified cognitively with the other,<sup>16</sup> and, I want to suggest, it is upon this cognitive variation that the meaning of anarchy and the distribution of power depends. Let me illustrate with a standard continuum of security systems.<sup>17</sup>

At one end is the “competitive” security system, in which states identify negatively with each other’s security so that ego’s gain is seen as alter’s loss. Negative identification under anarchy constitutes systems of “realist” power politics: risk-averse actors that infer intentions from capabilities and worry about relative gains and losses. At the limit—in the Hobbesian war of all against all—collective action is nearly impossible in such a system because each actor must constantly fear being stabbed in the back.

In the middle is the “individualistic” security system, in which states are indifferent to the relationship between their own and others’ security. This constitutes “neoliberal” systems: states are still self-regarding about their security but are concerned primarily with absolute gains rather than relative gains. One’s position in the distribution of power is less important, and collective action is more possible (though still subject to free riding because states continue to be “egoists”).

Competitive and individualistic systems are both “self-help” forms of anarchy in the sense that states do not positively identify the security of self with that of others but

instead treat security as the individual responsibility of each. Given the lack of a positive cognitive identification on the basis of which to build security regimes, power politics within such systems will necessarily consist of efforts to manipulate others to satisfy self-regarding interests.

This contrasts with the “cooperative” security system, in which states identify positively with one another so that the security of each is perceived as the responsibility of all. This is not self-help in any interesting sense, since the “self” in terms of which interests are defined is the community; national interests are international interests.<sup>18</sup> In practice, of course, the extent to which states’ identification with the community varies, from the limited form found in “concerts” to the full-blown form seen in “collective security” arrangements.<sup>19</sup> Depending on how well developed the collective self is, it will produce security practices that are in varying degrees altruistic or prosocial. This makes collective action less dependent on the presence of active threats and less prone to free riding.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, it restructures efforts to advance one’s objectives, or “power politics,” in terms of shared norms rather than relative power.<sup>21</sup>

On this view, the tendency in international relations scholarship to view power and institutions as two opposing explanations of foreign policy is therefore misleading, since anarchy and the distribution of power only have meaning for state action in virtue of the understandings and expectations that constitute institutional identities and interests. Self-help is one such institution, constituting one kind of anarchy but not the only kind. Waltz’s three-part definition of structure therefore seems underspecified. In order to go from structure to action, we need to add a fourth: the intersubjectively constituted structure of identities and interests in the system.

This has an important implication for the way in which we conceive of states in the state of nature before their first encounter with each other. Because states do not have conceptions of self and other, and thus security interests, apart from or prior to interaction, we assume too much about the state of nature if we concur with Waltz that, in virtue of anarchy, “international political systems, like economic markets, are formed by the coaction of self-regarding units.”<sup>22</sup> We also assume too much if we argue that, in virtue of anarchy, states in the state of nature necessarily face a “stag hunt” or “security dilemma.”<sup>23</sup> These claims presuppose a history of interaction in which actors have acquired “selfish” identities and interests; before interaction (and still in abstraction from first- and second-image factors) they would have no experience upon which to base such definitions of self and other. To assume otherwise is to attribute to states in the state of nature qualities that they can only possess in society.<sup>24</sup> Self-help is an institution, not a constitutive feature of anarchy . . .

### **Anarchy and the social construction of power politics**

If self-help is not a constitutive feature of anarchy, it must emerge causally from processes in which anarchy plays only a permissive role.<sup>25</sup> This reflects a second principle of constructivism: that the meanings in terms of which action is organized arise out of interaction.<sup>26</sup> This being said, however, the situation facing states as they encounter one another for the first time may be such that only self-regarding conceptions of identity can survive; if so, even if these conceptions are socially constructed, neorealists may be right in holding identities and interests constant and thus in privileging one particular meaning of anarchic structure over process. In this case, rationalists would be right to argue for a weak, behavioral conception of the difference that institutions make, and realists would be right to argue

that any international institutions which are created will be inherently unstable, since without the power to transform identities and interests they will be “continuing objects of choice” by exogenously constituted actors constrained only by the transaction costs of behavioral change.<sup>27</sup> Even in a permissive causal role, in other words, anarchy may decisively restrict interaction and therefore restrict viable forms of systemic theory. I address these causal issues first by showing how self-regarding ideas about security might develop and then by examining the conditions under which a key efficient cause—predation—may dispose states in this direction rather than others . . .

Consider two actors—ego and alter—encountering each other for the first time.<sup>28</sup> Each wants to survive and has certain material capabilities, but neither actor has biological or domestic imperatives for power, glory, or conquest (still bracketed), and there is no history of security or insecurity between the two. What should they do? Realists would probably argue that each should act on the basis of worst-case assumptions about the other’s intentions, justifying such an attitude as prudent in view of the possibility of death from making a mistake. Such a possibility always exists, even in civil society; however, society would be impossible if people made decisions purely on the basis of worst-case possibilities. Instead, most decisions are and should be made on the basis of probabilities, and these are produced by interaction, by what actors *do*.

In the beginning is ego’s gesture, which may consist, for example, of an advance, a retreat, a brandishing of arms, a laying down of arms, or an attack.<sup>29</sup> For ego, this gesture represents the basis on which it is prepared to respond to alter. This basis is unknown to alter, however, and so it must make an inference or “attribution” about ego’s intentions and, in particular, given that this is anarchy, about whether ego is a threat.<sup>30</sup> The content of this inference will largely depend on two considerations. The first is the gesture’s and ego’s physical qualities, which are in part contrived by ego and which include the direction of movement, noise, numbers, and immediate consequences of the gesture.<sup>31</sup> The second consideration concerns what alter would intend by such qualities were it to make such a gesture itself. Alter may make an attributional “error” in its inference about ego’s intent, but there is also no reason for it to assume *a priori*—before the gesture—that ego is threatening, since it is only through a process of signaling and interpreting that the costs and probabilities of being wrong can be determined.<sup>32</sup> Social threats are constructed, not natural . . .

This process of signaling, interpreting, and responding completes a “social act” and begins the process of creating intersubjective meanings. It advances the same way. The first social act creates expectations on both sides about each other’s future behavior: potentially mistaken and certainly tentative, but expectations nonetheless. Based on this tentative knowledge, ego makes a new gesture, again signifying the basis on which it will respond to alter, and again alter responds, adding to the pool of knowledge each has about the other, and so on over time. The mechanism here is reinforcement; interaction rewards actors for holding certain ideas about each other and discourages them from holding others. If repeated long enough, these “reciprocal typifications” will create relatively stable concepts of self and other regarding the issue at stake in the interaction . . .<sup>33</sup>

The simple overall model of identity- and interest-formation . . . applies to competitive institutions no less than to cooperative ones. Self-help security systems evolve from cycles of interaction in which each party acts in ways that the other feels are threatening to the self, creating expectations that the other is not to be trusted. Competitive or egoistic identities are caused by such insecurity; if the other is threatening, the self is forced to “mirror” such behavior in its conception of the self’s relationship to that other.<sup>34</sup> Being treated as an object for the gratification of others precludes the positive identification with others necessary for

collective security; conversely, being treated by others in ways that are empathic with respect to the security of the self permits such identification.<sup>35</sup>

Competitive systems of interaction are prone to security "dilemmas," in which the efforts of actors to enhance their security unilaterally threatens the security of the others, perpetuating distrust and alienation. The forms of identity and interest that constitute such dilemmas, however, are themselves ongoing effects of, not exogenous to, the interaction; identities are produced in and through "situated activity."<sup>36</sup> We do not *begin* our relationship with the aliens in a security dilemma; security dilemmas are not given by anarchy or nature. Of course, once institutionalized such a dilemma may be hard to change . . . , but the point remains: identities and interests are constituted by collective meanings that are always in process. As Sheldon Stryker emphasizes, "The social process is one of constructing and reconstructing self and social relationships."<sup>37</sup> If states find themselves in a self-help system, this is because their practices made it that way. Changing the practices will change the intersubjective knowledge that constitutes the system . . .

## Notes

- 1 See, for example, Joseph Grieco, "Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism," *International Organization* 42 (Summer 1988), pp. 485–507; Joseph Nye, "Neorealism and Neoliberalism," *World Politics* 40 (January 1988), pp. 235–51; Robert Keohane, "Neoliberal Institutionalism: A Perspective on World Politics," in his collection of essays entitled *International Institutions and State Power* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1989), pp. 1–20; John Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War," *International Security* 13 (Summer 1990), pp. 5–56, along with subsequent published correspondence regarding Mearsheimer's article; and Emerson Niou and Peter Ordeshook, "Realism Versus Neoliberalism: A Formulation," *American Journal of Political Science* 35 (May 1991), pp. 481–511.
- 2 The fact that I draw on these approaches aligns me with modernist constructivists, even though I also draw freely on the substantive work of postmodernists, especially Richard Ashley and Rob Walker. For a defense of this practice and a discussion of its epistemological basis, see my earlier article, "The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory," *International Organization* 41 (Summer 1987), pp. 335–70; and Ian Shapiro and Alexander Wendt, "The Difference That Realism Makes: Social Science and the Politics of Consent," forthcoming in *Politics and Society*. Among modernist constructivists, my argument is particularly indebted to the published work of Emanuel Adler, Friedrich Kratochwil, and John Ruggie, as well as to an unpublished paper by Naeem Inayatullah and David Levine entitled "Politics and Economics in Contemporary International Relations Theory," Syracuse University, Syracuse, N.Y., 1990.
- 3 See Viktor Gecas, "Rekindling the Sociological Imagination in Social Psychology," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 19 (March 1989), pp. 97–115.
- 4 Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1979), pp. 79–101.
- 5 Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987).
- 6 See, for example, Herbert Blumer, "The Methodological Position of Symbolic Interactionism," in his *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 2. Throughout this article, I assume that a theoretically productive analogy can be made between individuals and states. There are at least two justifications for this anthropomorphism. Rhetorically, the analogy is an accepted practice in mainstream international relations discourse, and since this article is an immanent rather than external critique, it should follow the practice. Substantively, states are collectivities of individuals that through their practices constitute each other as "persons" having interests, fears, and so on. A full theory of state identity- and interest-formation would nevertheless need to draw insights from the social psychology of groups and organizational theory, and for that reason my anthropomorphism is merely suggestive.
- 7 The phrase "distribution of knowledge" is Barry Barnes's, as discussed in his work *The Nature of Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988); see also Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966). The concern of recent international



- relations scholarship on "epistemic communities" with the cause-and-effect understandings of the world held by scientists, experts, and policymakers is an important aspect of the role of knowledge in world politics; see Peter Haas, "Do Regimes Matter? Epistemic Communities and Mediterranean Pollution Control," *International Organization* 43 (Summer 1989), pp. 377–404; and Ernst Haas, *When Knowledge Is Power: My constructivist approach would merely add to this an equal emphasis on how such knowledge also constitutes the structures and subjects of social life.*
- 8 For an excellent short statement of how collective meanings constitute identities, see Peter Berger, "Identity as a Problem in the Sociology of Knowledge," *European Journal of Sociology*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1966, pp. 32–40. See also David Morgan and Michael Schwalbe, "Mind and Self in Society: Linking Social Structure and Social Cognition," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 53 (June 1990), pp. 148–64. In my discussion, I draw on the following interactionist texts: George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934); Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*; Sheldon Stryker, *Symbolic Interactionism: A Social Structural Version* (Menlo Park, Calif.: Benjamin/Cummings, 1980); R. S. Perinbanayagam, *Signifying Acts: Structure and Meaning in Everyday Life* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985); John Hewitt, *Self and Society: A Symbolic Interactionist Social Psychology* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1988); and Turner, *A Theory of Social Interaction*. Despite some differences, much the same points are made by structurationists such as Bhaskar and Giddens. See Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1979); and Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).
  - 9 Berger, "Identity as a Problem in the Sociology of Knowledge," p. 111.
  - 10 While not normally cast in such terms, foreign policy scholarship on national role conceptions could be adapted to such identity language. See Kal Holsti, "National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy," *International Studies Quarterly* 14 (September 1970), pp. 233–309; and Stephen Walker, ed., *Role Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1987). For an important effort to do so, see Stephen Walker, "Symbolic Interactionism and International Politics: Role Theory's Contribution to International Organization," in C. Shih and Martha Cottam, eds., *Contending Dramas: A Cognitive Approach to Post-War International Organizational Processes* (New York: Praeger, forthcoming).
  - 11 On the "portfolio" conception of interests, see Barry Hindess, *Political Choice and Social Structure* (Aldershot, U.K.: Edward Elgar, 1989), pp. 2–3. The "definition of the situation" is a central concept in interactionist theory.
  - 12 Nelson Foote, "Identification as the Basis for a Theory of Motivation," *American Sociological Review* 16 (February 1951), p. 15. Such strongly sociological conceptions of interest have been criticized, with some justice, for being "oversocialized"; see Dennis Wrong, "The Oversocialized Conception of Man in Modern Sociology," *American Sociological Review* 26 (April 1961), pp. 183–93. For useful correctives, which focus on the activation of presocial but nondetermining human needs within social contexts, see Turner, *A Theory of Social Interaction*, pp. 23–69; and Viktor Gecas, "The Self-Concept as a Basis for a Theory of Motivation," in Judith Howard and Peter Callero, eds., *The Self-Society Dynamic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 171–87.
  - 13 In neo-Durkheimian parlance, institutions are "social representations." See Serge Moscovici, "The Phenomenon of Social Representations," in Rob Farr and Serge Moscovici, eds., *Social Representations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 3–69. See also Barnes, *The Nature of Power*. Note that this is a considerably more socialized cognitivism than that found in much of the recent scholarship on the role of "ideas" in world politics, which tends to treat ideas as commodities that are held by individuals and intervene between the distribution of power and outcomes. For a form of cognitivism closer to my own, see Emanuel Adler, "Cognitive Evolution: A Dynamic Approach for the Study of International Relations and Their Progress," in Emanuel Adler and Beverly Crawford, eds., *Progress in Postwar International Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 43–88.
  - 14 Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, p. 58.
  - 15 See Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*; and Alexander Wendt and Raymond Duvall, "Institutions and International Order," in Ernst-Otto Czempiel and James Rosenau, eds., *Global Changes and Theoretical Challenges* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1989), pp. 51–74.
  - 16 Proponents of choice theory might put this in terms of "interdependent utilities." For a useful overview of relevant choice-theoretic discourse, most of which has focused on the specific case of altruism, see Harold Hochman and Shmuel Nitzan, "Concepts of Extended Preference," *Journal*



- of *Economic Behavior and Organization* 6 (June 1985), pp. 161–76. The literature on choice theory usually does not link behavior to issues of identity. For an exception, see Amartya Sen, “Goals, Commitment, and Identity,” *Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization* 1 (Fall 1985), pp. 341–55; and Robert Higgs, “Identity and Cooperation: A Comment on Sen’s Alternative Program,” *Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization* 3 (Spring 1987), pp. 140–42.
- 17 Security systems might also vary in the extent to which there is a functional differentiation or a hierarchical relationship between patron and client, with the patron playing a hegemonic role within its sphere of influence in defining the security interests of its clients. I do not examine this dimension here; for preliminary discussion, see Alexander Wendt, “The States System and Global Militarization,” Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1989; and Alexander Wendt and Michael Barnett, “The International System and Third World Militarization,” unpublished manuscript, 1991.
- 18 This amounts to an “internationalization of the state.” For a discussion of this subject, see Raymond Duvall and Alexander Wendt. “The International Capital Regime and the Internationalization of the State,” unpublished manuscript, 1987. See also R. B. J. Walker, “Sovereignty, Identity, Community: Reflections on the Horizons of Contemporary Political Practice,” in R. B. J. Walker and Saul Mendlovitz, eds., *Contending Sovereignties* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1990), pp. 159–85.
- 19 On the spectrum of cooperative security arrangements, see Charles Kupchan and Clifford Kupchan. “Concerts, Collective Security, and the Future of Europe,” *International Security* 16 (Summer 1991), pp. 114–61; and Richard Smoke, “A Theory of Mutual Security,” in Richard Smoke and Andrei Kortunov, eds., *Mutual Security* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), pp. 59–111. These may be usefully set alongside Christopher Jencks’ “Varieties of Altruism,” in Jane Mansbridge, ed., *Beyond Self-Interest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 53–67.
- 20 On the role of collective identity in reducing collective action problems, see Bruce Fireman and William Gamson, “Utilitarian Logic in the Resource Mobilization Perspective,” in Mayer Zald and John McCarthy, eds., *The Dynamics of Social Movements* (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop, 1979), pp. 8–44; Robyn Dawes et al., “Cooperation for the Benefit of Us—Not Me, or My Conscience,” in Mansbridge, *Beyond Self-Interest*, pp. 97–110; and Craig Calhoun, “The Problem of Identity in Collective Action,” in Joan Huber, ed., *Macro-Micro Linkages in Sociology* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1991), pp. 51–75.
- 21 See Thomas Risse-Kappen, “Are Democratic Alliances Special?” unpublished manuscript, Yale University, New Haven, Conn., 1991. This line of argument could be expanded usefully in feminist terms. For a useful overview of the relational nature of feminist conceptions of self, see Paula England and Barbara Stanek Kilbourne, “Feminist Critiques of the Separative Model of Self: Implications for Rational Choice Theory,” *Rationality and Society* 2 (April 1990), pp. 156–71. On feminist conceptualizations of power, see Ann Tickner, “Hans Morgenthau’s Principles of Political Realism: A Feminist Reformulation,” *Millennium* 17 (Winter 1988), pp. 429–40; and Thomas Wartenberg, “The Concept of Power in Feminist Theory,” *Praxis International* 8 (October 1988), pp. 301–16.
- 22 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 91.
- 23 See Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), and Robert Jervis, “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 30 (January 1978), pp. 167–214.
- 24 My argument here parallels Rousseau’s critique of Hobbes. For an excellent critique of realist appropriations of Rousseau, see Michael Williams, “Rousseau, Realism, and Realpolitik,” *Millennium* 18 (Summer 1989), pp. 188–204. Williams argues that far from being a fundamental starting point in the state of nature, for Rousseau the stag hunt represented a stage in man’s fall. On p. 190, Williams cites Rousseau’s description of man prior to leaving the state of nature: “Man only knows himself; he does not see his own well-being to be identified with or contrary to that of anyone else; he neither hates anything nor loves anything; but limited to no more than physical instinct, he is no one, he is an animal.” For another critique of Hobbes on the state of nature that parallels my constructivist reading of anarchy, see Charles Landesman, “Reflections on Hobbes: Anarchy and Human Nature,” in Peter Caws, ed., *The Causes of Quarrel* (Boston: Beacon, 1989), pp. 139–48.
- 25 The importance of the distinction between constitutive and causal explanations is not sufficiently appreciated in constructivist discourse. See Wendt, “The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory,” pp. 362–65; Wendt, “The States System and Global Militarization,” pp. 110–13;

- and Wendt, "Bridging the Theory/Meta-Theory Gap in International Relations," *Review of International Studies* 17 (October 1991), p. 390.
- 26 See Blumer, "The Methodological Position of Symbolic Interactionism," pp. 2–4.
  - 27 See Robert Grafstein, "Rational Choice: Theory and Institutions," in Kristen Monroe, ed., *The Economic Approach to Politics* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), pp. 263–64. A good example of the promise and limits of transaction cost approaches to institutional analysis is offered by Robert Keohane in his *After Hegemony* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).
  - 28 This situation is not entirely metaphorical in world politics, since throughout history states have "discovered" each other, generating an instant anarchy as it were. A systematic empirical study of first contacts would be interesting.
  - 29 Mead's analysis of gestures remains definitive. See Mead's *Mind, Self, and Society*. See also the discussion of the role of signaling in the "mechanics of interaction" in Turner's *A Theory of Social Interaction*, pp. 74–79 and 92–115.
  - 30 On the role of attribution processes in the interactionist account of identity-formation, see Sheldon Stryker and Avi Gottlieb, "Attribution Theory and Symbolic Interactionism," in John Harvey et al., eds., *New Directions in Attribution Research*, vol. 3 (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1981), pp. 425–58; and Kathleen Crittenden, "Sociological Aspects of Attribution," *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 9, 1983, pp. 425–46. On attributional processes in international relations, see Shawn Rosenberg and Gary Wolfsfeld, "International Conflict and the Problem of Attribution," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 21 (March 1977), pp. 75–103.
  - 31 On the "stagecraft" involved in "presentations of self," see Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959). On the role of appearance in definitions of the situation, see Gregory Stone, "Appearance and the Self," in Arnold Rose, ed., *Human Behavior and Social Processes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), pp. 86–118.
  - 32 This discussion of the role of possibilities and probabilities in threat perception owes much to Stewart Johnson's comments on an earlier draft of my article.
  - 33 On "reciprocal typifications," see Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, pp. 54–58.
  - 34 The following articles by Noel Kaplowitz have made an important contribution to such thinking in international relations: "Psychopolitical Dimensions of International Relations: The Reciprocal Effects of Conflict Strategies," *International Studies Quarterly* 28 (December 1984), pp. 373–406; and "National Self-Images, Perception of Enemies, and Conflict Strategies: Psychopolitical Dimensions of International Relations," *Political Psychology* 11 (March 1990), pp. 39–82.
  - 35 These arguments are common in theories of narcissism and altruism. See Heinz Kohut, *Self-Psychology and the Humanities* (New York: Norton, 1985); and Martin Hoffmann, "Empathy, Its Limitations, and Its Role in a Comprehensive Moral Theory," in William Kurtines and Jacob Gewirtz, eds., *Morality, Moral Behavior, and Moral Development* (New York: Wiley, 1984), pp. 283–302.
  - 36 See C. Norman Alexander and Mary Glenn Wiley, "Situated Activity and Identity Formation," in Morris Rosenberg and Ralph Turner, eds., *Social Psychology: Sociological Perspectives* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), pp. 269–89.
  - 37 Sheldon Stryker, "The Vitalization of Symbolic Interactionism," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 50 (March 1987), p. 93.

# Culture clash

## Assessing the importance of ideas in security studies

*Michael C. Desch*

From: *International Security* 23, no. 1 (Summer 1998): 141–70.

Cultural theories have long enjoyed a prominent place in the field of international security. Indeed, two waves have come and gone since the start of World War II, and we are now at the high watermark of a third.<sup>1</sup> Today's culturalists in national security studies are a heterogeneous lot, who bring a variety of theories to the table. However, virtually all new culturalists in security studies are united in their belief that realism, the dominant research program in international relations that emphasizes factors such as the material balance of power, is an overrated, if not bankrupt, body of theory, and that cultural theories, which look to ideational factors, do a much better job of explaining how the world works.

This article assesses this latest wave of cultural theories in security studies by focusing on some of its most prominent examples. There is no question that virtually all cultural theories tell us something about how states behave. The crucial question, however, is whether these new theories merely supplement realist theories or actually threaten to supplant them. I argue that when cultural theories are assessed using evidence from the real world, there is no reason to think that they will relegate realist theories to the dustbin of social science history. The best case that can be made for these new cultural theories is that they are sometimes useful as a supplement to realist theories.

The post-Cold War wave of culturalism in security studies is a broad research program with a wide range of research focuses (such as military doctrine, escalation, weapons acquisition, grand strategy, and foreign policy decision making), embracing a diverse range of epistemologies (from the avowedly positivistic to the explicitly antipositivistic) and utilizing a broad array of explanatory variables. Four strands of cultural theorizing dominate the current wave: *organizational*, *political*, *strategic*, and *global*. For example, Jeffrey Legro holds that militaries have different organizational cultures that will lead them to fight differently.<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Kier argues that different domestic political cultures will adopt divergent means of controlling their militaries based on domestic political considerations, not external strategic concerns.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Peter Katzenstein and Noburo Okawara, and Thomas Berger, maintain that domestic political attitudes toward the use of force vary significantly among states similarly situated in the international system.<sup>4</sup> Stephen Rosen argues that societies with different domestic social structures will produce different levels of military power.<sup>5</sup> Iain Johnston suggests that domestic strategic culture, rather than international systemic imperatives, best explains a state's grand strategy.<sup>6</sup> Martha Finnemore argues that global cultural norms, rather than domestic state interests, determine patterns of great power intervention.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Richard Price and Nina Tannenwald claim that global cultural norms proscribing the use of particular weapons best account for why they are not used.<sup>8</sup> Robert Herman argues that the Soviet Union bowed out of the Cold War because it

was attracted to the norms and culture of the West.<sup>9</sup> Thomas Risse-Kappen argues that alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) coalesce around *global* norms rather than responding to mutual threats.<sup>10</sup> In a similar vein, Michael Barnett maintains that common identity, rather than shared threat, best explains alliance patterns.<sup>11</sup> Finally, Dana Eyre and Mark Suchman argue that all states will acquire similar sorts of high-technology conventional weaponry, not because they need them, but because these weapons epitomize “stateness.”<sup>12</sup>

These diverse arguments have a common thread: dissatisfaction with realist explanations for state behavior in the realm of national security. As Iain Johnston notes, “All [cultural approaches] take the realist edifice as target, and focus on cases where structural material notions of interest cannot explain a particular strategic choice.”<sup>13</sup> Although it is obvious that cultural theories seek to challenge the realist research program, the key question is whether the new strategic culturalism supplants or supplements realist explanations.<sup>14</sup> Some of the new strategic culturalists take an uncompromising position that rejects realism as a first cut at explaining strategic behavior and maintains that material and structural variables are of “secondary importance.”<sup>15</sup> Others concede that sometimes structural variables will trump culture, but that most of the time the reverse will be true.<sup>16</sup> All maintain that cultural variables are more than epiphenomena to material factors and often explain outcomes for which realism cannot account.<sup>17</sup> Because no proponent of realism thinks that realist theories explain everything,<sup>18</sup> there will be little argument about culture, or any other variables, supplementing realism. The major debate will concern whether cultural theories can supplant realist theories. To make the case that cultural theories should supplant existing theories, the new culturalists would have to demonstrate that their theories outperform realist theories in “hard cases” for cultural theories. As I show, however, most new culturalists do not employ such cases . . .

### **Assessing the post-Cold War wave of culturalism in security studies**

We face three potential challenges to assessing the explanatory power of the third wave of culturalist theories in security studies. First, cultural variables are tricky to define and operationalize. Second, some cultural theorists believe that cultural variables make every case *sui generis*, and so their theories are not broadly applicable and testable across a number of cases. Finally, because culturalism is actually a cluster of theories—a research program—it does not make sense to assess culturalism *per se*; rather, we must test particular culturalist theories. Although these challenges make assessing cultural theories difficult, they do not present insurmountable obstacles to this endeavor . . .

### **Why culture cannot supplant realist theories in national security**

The central problem with the new culturalism in security studies is that its theories, by themselves, do not provide much additional explanatory power beyond existing theories. The Cold War wave of cultural theorizing had the virtue of making clear empirical predictions that made it possible to test its theories against both real-world evidence and alternative theories. As we saw, the empirical track record of strategic cultural analysis during the Cold War was weak.

Although the post-Cold War wave of cultural theorizing has, for the most part, not yet been proven wrong, it will not supplant realist theories in national security studies because it has selected cases that do not provide crucial tests that enable us to distinguish which

theories are better.<sup>19</sup> Instead of selecting “hard cases” for cultural theories, much of the new cultural literature in security studies relies on four other types of cases: (1) “most likely” cases for the culturalist theories; (2) cases that have the same outcomes as predicted by realist theories; (3) cases where the culturalist interpretations are disputable; and (4) cases in which it is too early to tell what the outcome will be.

### ***Most likely cases***

The new culturalist arguments may be right in at least two instances, but they do not tell us much about whether culturalism can supplant realism. This is because they employ “most likely” cases for culturalist theories and “least likely” cases for the realist alternatives.<sup>20</sup> These cases are therefore poor tests because we would expect the culturalist theory to perform well. “If a theory stands up under a tougher test,” argues Arthur Stinchcombe, “it becomes more credible than it is if it stands up when we have subjected it only to weak tests.”<sup>21</sup>

For instance, Stephen Rosen’s argument that different types of societies will produce different levels of military effectiveness is undoubtedly true for his Indian cases. Historically, Indian society was deeply divided, and this undermined India’s military effectiveness. However, the value of this evidence for the larger question of whether domestic, ideational approaches are better than international, material approaches is minimal. Realists do not expect all states to have identical domestic structures. Rather, they expect functional similarity among the great powers but also different internal structures and external behaviors based on such things as geographic position and level of military technology. Thus realists would not expect India, or any other state that is not consistently a central player in global politics, to be as militarily effective as, or have similar domestic structures as, states that are central players.<sup>22</sup> In other words, given that India is a “most likely” case for culturalist theories, the fact that it passed that test tells us little about the more general superiority of cultural theories.

Similarly, Martha Finnemore argues that realists would anticipate intervention only when vital geopolitical interests are at stake, and the fact that there is much humanitarian intervention in places without much geopolitical value leads her to conclude that this is a puzzle for realism. This mischaracterizes the realist argument: realists recognize that states have a hierarchy of interests, security at the top, but then economic welfare, ideological, and humanitarian concerns in descending order.<sup>23</sup> Humanitarian intervention per se is not inconsistent with realism: only such intervention that undermines a state’s security or economic interests is. As Finnemore concedes in her historical cases, “Humanitarian action was rarely taken when it jeopardized other stated goals or interests of a state.”<sup>24</sup> Given that this is true of all of the contemporary cases she examines, they are “most likely” cases for culturalist theories. Neither Rosen nor Finnemore is wrong about their cases, and both have shed light on the questions of why states might not be able to generate much military power and why states intervene in place where they have few strategic interests, but neither has demonstrated the superiority of the culturalist approach.

### ***Indistinguishable cases***

The second class of cases that culturalists employ are those in which their theories and realist theories make similar or identical predictions. For example, Jeffrey Legro argues that the different strategic behaviors, in particular escalation decisions, of Germany, the United

Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and the United States during World War II were the result of their militaries' distinct organizational cultures. Few realists would agree with his assertion that this presents a puzzle for realism, because while realists would anticipate states to be functionally similar, they would also expect differently placed states to adopt different military strategies.<sup>25</sup> Therefore realists would not be surprised that Great Britain escalated the air war against Germany because until 1944 that was the only way it could inflict damage on its adversary.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, realists would expect that German strategy would be very different, tied much more closely to the ground war, as a result of Germany's geographical position and the advances it had made in armor and mechanized warfare technology.<sup>27</sup>

They would also anticipate that German air strategy would be very different from Britain's because tactical, rather than strategic, air power best complemented the blitzkrieg.<sup>28</sup> Early German escalation of the U-boat war also seems rational inasmuch as that was the only way for the Germans to strike at Great Britain.<sup>29</sup> In short, Legro's organizational cultural theory and realism make the same retrodictions for these cases . . .

### ***Disputable cases***

In a number of cases the new culturalists' interpretations differ dramatically from realist theories, but they are also highly debatable. For example, Richard Price and Nina Tannenwald argue that the "odium attached" to the use of chemical weapons largely accounts for their lack of use.<sup>30</sup> Without this normative proscription, they believe it likely that chemical weapons would have been widely used. "In the absence of the context established by this international norm and the thresholds set thereby," Price suggests, "World War II in all likelihood would have been a chemical war."<sup>31</sup> Despite general abhorrence of chemical weapons, mutual deterrence and their lack of military utility provide more convincing explanations for why they were not used more often. Specifically, chemical weapons were useful only against unprepared adversaries or civilians, it was relatively easy for prepared troops to defend against them, and they complicated offensive operations. These factors, rather than normative proscriptions, best explain why chemical weapons were not used in combat more extensively in World War II.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, Price and Tannenwald face the problem of explaining why norms of nonuse before World War I did not prevent massive use during the war or why norms prevented the Axis powers from using chemical warfare against Allied military forces, but did not prevent their use against unarmed civilians (the Jews) and troops without a retaliatory capability (the Chinese and the Ethiopians).<sup>33</sup> Norms against the use of chemical weapons existed in the interwar era, as they had before World War I, but these norms reflected, rather than shaped, a strategic reality determined largely by the utility (or lack thereof) of chemical weapons and by mutual deterrence. More recently, Iraq's use of chemical weapons against the Iranians during the Iran–Iraq War and unarmed Kurdish civilians, but not against the United States during the Persian Gulf War, is also most convincingly accounted for by deterrence and utility arguments. The Iranians and the Iraqi Kurds had no retaliatory capacity and scant chemical and biological warfare (CBW) defensive capability, and so Iraq's use of chemical weapons made some strategic sense. Conversely, the United States and its coalition allies had both robust CBW defensive capability, and a huge arsenal of weapons of mass destruction with which to retaliate, and so it made little strategic sense for the Iraqis to use CBW.<sup>34</sup>

Robert Herman's argument that the Cold War ended because the Soviets were attracted to Western norms and culture is plausible, but alternative explanations are even more compelling.<sup>35</sup> Some analysts attribute the changes in Soviet thinking primarily to the fact that



the nuclear revolution made the world defense dominant; others argue that Soviet military fears of losing a high-technology arms race facilitated Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms.<sup>36</sup> Herman is also unable to account for subsequent Russian realpolitik behavior more in accord with the realist expectation of unrelenting great power competition.<sup>37</sup>

In a similar vein, Thomas Risse-Kappen portrays NATO as an alliance based on shared "republican liberalism," rather than one based on a common perception of threat.<sup>38</sup> The difficulty Risse-Kappen faces is to explain how illiberal states such as Greece and Turkey remained in the alliance. Common ideology or culture among the NATO states may have been coincidental, because many influential policymakers in the United States and other Western states had few qualms during the Cold War in allying with illiberal states in other areas of the world.<sup>39</sup> This, however, is not a puzzle for an alliance theory that anticipates alignment based on mutual interest rather than on common ideology.<sup>40</sup>

### **Premature cases**

Finally, there are a few cases employed by the new culturalists in security studies where it is just too early to tell what the outcome will be. Thomas Berger, and Peter Katzenstein and Noburu Okawara, think that German and Japanese political cultures have changed irrevocably from militaristic to pacifistic. "Germany and Japan," Berger claims, "as a result of their historical experiences and the way in which those experiences were interpreted by domestic political actors, have developed beliefs and values that make them peculiarly reluctant to resort to the use of force."<sup>41</sup> There are, however, compelling international structural explanations for this change in German and Japanese political cultures: specifically, their defeat in World War II, Allied occupation, and the protective umbrella of the U.S. security guarantee. Therefore the real test of these cultural arguments will come in the future, especially if U.S. commitments to NATO and Japan wane. Berger ultimately concedes the realist argument that "Japan's anti-militarism in its present form could not survive both a weakening of its alliance with the United States and the emergence of a new regional security threat."<sup>42</sup> It is therefore too soon to tell whether Japanese and German political cultures have changed for good, but there are persuasive noncultural explanations for the cultural changes of the Cold War, and there is some evidence that Germany and Japan may revert to a more traditional great power strategic culture in the post-Cold War era. Ironically, some of these pessimistic views are also based on cultural variables.<sup>43</sup>

The new culturalists believe that they have chosen "hard cases" for their theories just because they focus on national security issues.<sup>44</sup> But what makes a case a "crucial test" and a "hard case" is (1) whether the competing theories make different predictions about its outcome, and (2) whether one theory should be expected to do better at predicting it than another. Issue area, by itself, does not make a case hard or easy. What does is whether the theory actually makes determinative predictions about the particular case. Although not as obviously wrong as the Cold War wave, the failure of the post-Cold War wave of strategic culture to choose "hard cases" for their theories does not inspire high confidence in some of its proponents' claims to supplant the realist research program . . .

### **Notes**

- 1 In addition to Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), the main pieces in this literature are Peter J. Katzenstein and Noburo Okawara, "Japan's National Security: Structures, Norms, and

- Policies," *International Security*, Vol. 17, No.4 (Spring 1993), pp. 84–118; Thomas U. Berger, "From Sword to Chrysanthemum: Japan's Culture of Anti-militarism," *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Spring 1993), pp. 119–150; Jeffrey W. Legro, "Military Culture and Inadvertent Escalation in World War II," *International Security*, Vol. 18, No.4 (Spring 1994), pp. 108–142; Alastair Iain Johnston, "Thinking about Strategic Culture," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No.4 (Spring 1995), pp. 32–64; Elizabeth Kier, "Culture and Military Doctrine: France between the Wars," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No.4 (Spring 1995), pp. 65–93; Jeffrey W. Legro, *Cooperation under Fire: Anglo-German Restraint during World War II* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995); Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995); Jeffrey W. Legro, "Culture and Preferences in the International Cooperation Two-Step," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 90, No.1 (March 1996), pp. 118–137; Peter J. Katzenstein, *Cultural Norms and National Security* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996); Elizabeth Kier, *Imagining War: French Military Doctrine between the Wars* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997); and Richard Price, *The Chemical Weapons Taboo* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997). Stephen Peter Rosen, "Military Effectiveness: Why Society Matters," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No.4 (Spring 1995), pp. 23, 24, and his *Societies and Military Power: India and Its Armies* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 22–26, explicitly contrast his domestic structural approach with a cultural approach. I include him within the post-Cold War culturalist wave, however, because the domestic social structure he is most interested in, the Indian caste system, has largely ideational roots.
- 2 Legro, *Cooperation under Fire*, p. 1.
  - 3 Elizabeth Kier, "Culture and French Military Doctrine before World War II," in Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security*, p. 187; and Kier, "Culture and Military Doctrine," p. 84.
  - 4 Katzenstein and Okawara, "Japan's National Security," pp. 84–118; Katzenstein, *Cultural Norms and National Security*; and Berger, "From Sword to Chrysanthemum," pp. 119–150.
  - 5 Rosen, "Military Effectiveness," pp. 5–32; and Rosen, *Societies and Military Power*, pp. viii–xi.
  - 6 Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, pp. x, 247, 262–266; Johnston, "Thinking about Strategic Culture," p. 63; and Alastair Iain Johnston, "Cultural Realism and Maoist China," in Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security*, p. 257.
  - 7 Martha Finnemore, "Constructing Norms of Humanitarian Intervention," in Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security*, p. 156.
  - 8 Richard Price and Nina Tannenwald, "Norms and Deterrence: The Nuclear Weapons Taboo," in *ibid.*, pp. 114–153.
  - 9 Robert G. Herman, "Identity, Norms, and National Security: The Soviet Foreign Policy Revolution and the End of the Cold War," in *ibid.*, pp. 271–316.
  - 10 Thomas Risse-Kappen, "Collective Identity in a Democratic Community: The Case of NATO," in *ibid.*, pp. 357–399.
  - 11 Michael N. Barnett, "Identity and Alliances in the Middle East," in *ibid.*, pp. 400–450.
  - 12 Dana P. Eyre and Mark C. Suchman, "Status, Norms, and the Proliferation of Chemical Weapons: An Institutional Theory Approach," in *ibid.*, pp. 79–113.
  - 13 Johnston, "Thinking about Strategic Culture," p. 41. All the essays in Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security*, explicitly target realism.
  - 14 The authors in the Katzenstein volume differ widely on this. See Ronald L. Jepperson, Alexander Wendt, and Peter J. Katzenstein, "Norms, Identity, and Culture in National Security," in Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security*, pp. 37, 68; Paul Kowert and Jeffrey Legro's, "Norms, Identity, and Their Limits: A Theoretical Reprise," in *ibid.*, p. 496; and Katzenstein, "Conclusion: National Security in a Changing World," in *ibid.*, pp. 507–508.
  - 15 Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, p. 1.
  - 16 Legro, *Cooperation under Fire*, p. 221.
  - 17 Katzenstein, *Cultural Norms and National Security*; and Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein, "Norms, Identity, and Culture," p. 34.
  - 18 Some of the best critiques of realism have come from within the paradigm itself. See, for example, Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No.1 (Summer 1994), pp. 72–108.
  - 19 On crucial tests, see Arthur L. Stinchcombe, *Constructing Social Theories* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1968), pp. 24–28.

- 20 On "most likely" and "least likely" cases, see Harry Eckstein, "Case Study and Theory in Political Science," in Fred I. Greenstein and Nelson Polsby, eds, *Handbook of Political Science*, Vol. 7 (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1975), pp. 118–119.
- 21 Stinchcombe, *Constructing Social Theories*, p. 20.
- 22 The classic statement of this argument, which realists frequently cite, is Otto Hintze, "Military Organization and the Organization of the State," in Felix Gilbert, ed., *The Historical Essays of Otto Hintze* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 178–221. The reason I think that India faced a less challenging international security environment is that in one data set it had a yearly battle death average of 263 compared with a central actor like Prussia/Germany, which had 41,181. See J. David Singer and Melvin Small, *The Wages of War: 1816–1965: A Statistical Handbook* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1972), Table 11.2. Another source notes that India fought 95 wars, whereas the German states participated in 170. See George C. Kohn, *Dictionary of Wars* (New York: Facts on File, 1986), pp. 545–550.
- 23 For a discussion of realism's hierarchy of state interests, see Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977), p. 24.
- 24 Finnemore, "Constructing Norms," p. 168.
- 25 Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 87–88; Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine*, pp. 36, 61–2, 65–66; Joseph Grieco, *Cooperation among Nations: Europe, America, and Non-Tariff Barriers to Trade* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 39–40; and Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 97–99, 183–192. An extended discussion of this can be found in Colin Elman, "Responding to Military Practices: Convergence and Divergence in International Security," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association, San Diego, California, April 16–20, 1996.
- 26 Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (New York: Norton, 1995), p. 108.
- 27 For discussions of German blitzkrieg strategy, see John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 29–30, 32–33, 35–43; and Len Deighton, *Blitzkrieg: From the Rise of Hitler to the Fall of Dunkirk* (New York: HarperPaperbacks, 1994).
- 28 Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 70–71.
- 29 On the U-boat campaign, see Dan van der Vat, *The Atlantic Campaign: World War II's Great Struggle at Sea* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).
- 30 Price and Tannenwald, "Norms and Deterrence," p. 120.
- 31 Price, *The Chemical Weapons Taboo*, p. 100.
- 32 John Ellis Van Courtland Moon, "Chemical Weapons and Deterrence: The World War II Experience," *International Security*, Vol. 8, No.4 (Spring 1984), pp. 3–35; Barton J. Bernstein, "Why We Didn't Use Poison Gas in World War II," *American Heritage*, Vol. 36, No.5 (August/September 1995), pp. 40–45; and Frederic J. Brown, *Chemical Warfare: A Study in Restraint* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1968), p. 37.
- 33 Patrick E. Tyler, "Germ War, a Current World Threat, Is a Remembered Nightmare in China," *New York Times*, February 4, 1997, p. 6.
- 34 Rick Atkinson, *Crusade: The Untold Story of the Persian Gulf War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), p. 87.
- 35 For a prescient geopolitical argument about the inevitable collapse of the Soviet Union, see Randall Collins, "Long-term Social Change and the Territorial Power of States," in Louis Kriesberg, ed., *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts, and Change*, vol. 1 (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1978), pp. 1–34.
- 36 Kenneth A. Oye, "Explaining the End of the Cold War: Morphological and Behavioral Adaptations to the Nuclear Peace?" in Lebow and Risse-Kappen, *International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War*, pp. 57–84; John Lewis Gaddis, "Hanging Tough Paid Off," *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (January/February 1989), pp. 11–14; and Michael C. Desch, "Why the Soviet Military Supported Gorbachev and Why the Russian Military Might Only Support Yeltsin for a Price," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 16, No.4 (December 1993), pp. 455–489.
- 37 Alexei K. Pushkov, "Russia and America: The Honeymoon's Over," *Foreign Policy*, No. 93 (Winter 1993/94), pp. 77–90; and Bruce D. Porter and Carol R. Saivetz, "The Once and Future Empire: Russia and the 'Near Abroad,'" *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No.3 (Summer 1994), pp. 75–90.

- 38 Risse-Kappen, "Collective Identity in a Democratic Community: The Case of NATO," pp. 357–399.
- 39 Jeane Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," *Commentary*, Vol. 68, No. 5 (November 1979), pp. 34–45.
- 40 Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987).
- 41 Berger, "Norms, Identity, and National Security in Germany and Japan," in Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security*, p. 318.
- 42 Berger, "From Sword to Chrysanthemum," quotation on p. 120; see also pp. 147–148.
- 43 See Jacob Heilbrun, "Germany's New Right," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 75, No. 6 (November/ December 1996), pp. 80–89; Alan Cowell, "Pro-Nazi Incidents in German Army Raise Alarm," *New York Times*, November 5, 1997, p. 4; "The Man Japan Wants to Forget," *Economist*, November 11, 1995, pp. 85–86; and Henry Scott Stokes, "Lost Samurai: The Withered Soul of Postwar Japan," *Harper's*, October 1985, pp. 55–63. A brilliant examination of the dark side of the Japanese postwar culture of pacifism is Ian Buruma, *The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994).
- 44 Katzenstein, "Introduction," and "Conclusion," pp. 11, 523.

# **The English School vs. American realism**

A meeting of minds or divided  
by a common language?

*Richard Little*

From: *Review of International Studies* 29 (2003): 443–60.

. . . Before turning to what the English School can tell us about the post-Cold War world . . . it is important to clarify where the English School is coming from. In doing so, I want to demonstrate that American realism and the English School share a common intellectual heritage that can be traced back to the classical realists who were developing their ideas in the middle of the twentieth century. What the modern American realists have done, however, is to take one strand of classical realist thinking and refine it on the basis of their positivist methodology. There would be no problem with this procedure, in principle, provided that they had self-consciously decided to make a break with the classical realists. But members of this school often associate themselves with the classical realist tradition without apparently being aware of what they have left behind.

. . . A close reading reveals that the key concepts that lie at the heart of the English School approach—international system, international society, world society, and international justice—can all be clearly identified in the works of seminal theorists in classical realism such as Morgenthau.

What the English School does, therefore, is to clarify an approach that is more implicit than explicit in classical realism. By exploring these links between the English School and classical realism in the first part of this contribution, I hope to reveal what is distinctive about the English School orientation. I will also reveal why, from an English School perspective, there is certainly an important social element missing from modern American realism, which is present in classical realism. From the English School perspective, therefore, American realism presents a one-dimensional account that generates a distorted, or certainly incomplete, understanding of international relations . . .

## **Classical realism and the English School**

There are significant links that can be established between classical realism and the English School. These can be highlighted by focusing on the central concepts that underpin English School thinking—international system, international society and world society, and international justice. What we see in this section is that although the English School highlighted these concepts, the antecedents of their thinking in each case can be traced back to the classical realists. Highlighting these links helps to reveal that the American realists have only emphasised one element of classical realism at the expense of thinking about the social dimension of international politics.

***The international system***

Conventional wisdom suggests that the dynamics of the international system, and, in particular, the dynamics associated with the balance of power, provide the main focal point for classical realists. In the case of Morgenthau, however, this assessment certainly requires some modification. For him, there is an implicit distinction drawn between how the balance of power operates in the international system and how it operates in an international society. Although there is not the clear-cut distinction drawn between international system and society that we find in the English School, there is the same presumption that they co-exist. A theory of the balance of power shorn of all normative implications, therefore, is distinctive to modern American realists.

An international system emerges for the English School when “states are in regular contact with each other and where in addition there is interaction between them, sufficient to make the behaviour of each a necessary element in the calculation of the other”.<sup>1</sup> Classical realists subscribe to a similar position and Morgenthau accepts that there is an automatic law ensuring that if one state increases its power capabilities in order to pursue an imperial policy at the expense of a rival, then there will be a “proportionate increase in the power of the other”.<sup>2</sup> A systemic balance of power, therefore, represents the default position in any anarchic arena. It is this kind of logic that underpins the American realist theory of international politics, and there is no doubt that the thinking has resulted in a much more coherent and comprehensive theory of a systemic balance of power than was advanced by the classical realists or the English School. But, as a consequence, the persistence of unipolarity in the post-Cold War world poses a much bigger anomaly for the American realists than for the other two schools and there is no straightforward answer as to why the United States has not been confronted by a balancing alliance.

Classical realism, however, presupposes that the balance of power can only work effectively in the context of societal norms. If states refuse to accept the moral standing of each other then they will find that they engage in a struggle of unlimited “ferociousness and intensity”.<sup>3</sup> A purely systemic balance is very different from a societal balance. It would resemble, Morgenthau argues, a Hobbesian “state of nature”.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, although the English School acknowledges that classical realists have postulated an “automatic tendency” for a balance of power to emerge in the international system, they deny that there is an “inevitable tendency for a balance of power to arise” because states do not always seek to maximise their relative power position, often preferring to devote their resources and energies to other ends.<sup>5</sup> As a consequence, Bull formulates the idea of a “fortuitous” balance of power that can emerge without “any conscious effort” on the part of the members of the system.<sup>6</sup> This outcome is seen to be most likely in a situation where two dominant states are both striving to achieve hegemony within an international system. Because the outcome is independent of the objectives being pursued by the states, it is viewed as a product of the system . . .

The English School acknowledges, therefore, that a balance of power might fortuitously arise within the international system, but, like Morgenthau, the members do not consider that such a balance could provide the basis for a stable international order. As a consequence, Bull displays very little interest in a purely systemic balance of power and immediately turns his attention to a societal balance of power. The reluctance of the English School to accept that there is a logic to anarchy necessarily generating a balance of power, could be a consequence of their presumption that anarchy is a very fragile structure and that, as Watson has put it, there has been a perennial pendulum swing in international relations between



empire and anarchy, with the pull being towards empire rather than anarchy.<sup>7</sup> Certainly the historical record indicates that it has been more difficult for anarchic systems to survive than the American realist's theory would suggest. For the American realists, the persistence of anarchy is not seen to be problematic, but from the English School perspective, this is itself a problem.

### ***International society***

Although the English School makes the concept much more explicit, classical realists also subscribed to the idea of an international society. Both accept, in other words, that international behaviour have been regulated, on a habitual basis, by an established body of norms. Morgenthau, for example, goes to considerable pains to contest what he sees as the "widespread misconception" that there is no such thing as international law.<sup>8</sup> He asserts, to the contrary, that international law emerged over 400 years ago and that it has been "scrupulously observed" from the start . . .<sup>9</sup>

Morgenthau, therefore, established an intimate link between international society and the balance of power, and the English School travels along exactly the same route. Bull, for example, draws a sharp distinction between a "fortuitous" balance that sometimes operates within an international system, and a "contrived" balance that is seen to underpin any international society. A contrived balance is associated with any international setting where the Great Powers all accept the need to sustain a society of states. It follows that there is an intersubjective agreement, a "silent compact", to refrain from endeavouring to monopolise international power and to take the necessary steps to restrain any state that does pursue this strategy. So a "contrived" balance of power becomes synonymous with the survival of a society of states. The Great Powers engage in voluntary restraint because they know that any attempt to overthrow the balance will be a "hopeless undertaking".<sup>10</sup> Although this argument is not spelled out, it is also apparent that while the undertaking may eventually prove to be "hopeless", it could lead to the demise of the societal balance and the emergence of a systemic balance which both the English School and the classical realists believe has the potential to turn into a "state of nature".<sup>11</sup>

Both the English School and the classical realists go further, however, and insist that there is a necessary relationship between international law and the societal balance of power. The logic underpinning this relationship, however, is never spelled out with anything like the precision that characterises the analyses offered by American realists. The argument seems to be that in the context of a societal balance of power each state will abide by international law because if it fails to do so, other states will sanction them. Reciprocity seems to lie at the heart of this process.<sup>12</sup> This procedure will only prove effective, however, provided that there is no state in the system that can ignore the sanctions of other states. There will be a tendency for states to voluntarily subscribe to international law, therefore, because infringements of international law pose a threat to the societal balance of power . . .

This line of argument may still not seem sufficient to account for why states obey rules, when it is not in their immediate interests to do so. But as Hurrell has suggested, members of the English School have provided various reasons to account for the observation of international law. He suggests that norms are observed because of "power and coercion, self-interest and reciprocal benefits, institutionalized habit or inertia, the existence of a sense of community, procedural legitimacy of the process of rule creation, or the moral suasion that derives from a shared sense of justice". But Hurrell also acknowledges that the English School does no more than establish an aggregate list of factors "without providing any

precise guide as to their relationship”<sup>13</sup> Thus it is not only American realists who find the arguments presented by the English School incomplete and inadequate.<sup>14</sup>

### ***World society***

Although the idea of world society is most closely associated with the English School, the concept also plays a key role in Morgenthau’s discussion of the formation of a world state. Although he accepted that international law and diplomacy are designed to maintain a society of states and are unlikely, as a consequence, to promote international government, he did not suggest that a world government is inconceivable or that the formation of a world government should be opposed on principle. On the contrary, he believed that, if we are to survive, then it is essential, in the long run, for a world government to be established, because only a world government can effectively eliminate war. A world government, however, presupposes the existence of a world state and the demise of the society of sovereign states.<sup>15</sup>

Morgenthau is clear that such a development cannot be implemented from the top, either through world conquest, by an imperial state, or by some kind of constitutional confederation. Any successful movement away from a society of states must be preceded by a transformation at the level of the community. A necessary, if not sufficient, precondition for the establishment of a world state is that individuals must have shifted their primary allegiance from their local community to a world community. Morgenthau acknowledged, however, that it would be extremely difficult to establish a world community, although he was very enthusiastic about the functional theory associated with the writings of Mitrany and saw the special agencies associated with the United Nations as one way forward to promote the creation of a world community.<sup>16</sup>

The English School has a different and more complex take on this issue. Members of the school are divided on the significance of what they call world society for the existence of international society, with some arguing that an element of world society has to have emerged if a stable society of states is going to exist. Others are less certain. But there is considerable ambiguity surrounding the issue. For example, very much in line with Morgenthau, Bull argues at one point that an expansion of world society, by making individuals the subjects of international law, would undermine “the international order based on the society of states”.<sup>17</sup> Later, however, he argues that the “future of international society is likely to be determined, among other things, by the preservation and extension of a common culture”.<sup>18</sup> Diez and Whitman come to the conclusion that this ambiguity is a feature of international politics and we can establish substantial analytical purchase by making the ambiguity explicit and “treating it as an *inherent characteristic of the international*”.<sup>19</sup>

### ***International justice***

Classical realists and the English School both draw a distinction between order and justice.<sup>20</sup> It is acknowledged, in other words, that there is no reason to suppose that a rule-governed society will necessarily be a just society. On the contrary, classical realists such as Morgenthau and Carr, both heavily influenced by Mannheim, the sociologist of knowledge, worked from the premise that those with power will use their power to promote their own interests, although often they will also rely heavily on a dominant ideology to obscure this link between power and interest . . .

The English School has also thought hard about the role of justice in international relations and are clear that there are ideas about what constitutes justice in international relations and

that these ideas “play a role in the course of events”.<sup>21</sup> Bull goes on to draw a distinction between justice at the level of the state and justice at the level of the individual. Justice at the level of the state requires international society to ensure, for example, that the sovereign rights of states are observed. But this tells us nothing about human justice. In other words, just as in any society, it is inevitable that those states with power will use their power to ensure that the interests of these states are served at the expense of the remaining states in the system. With the consolidation of the state, therefore, the idea of human rights has gone “underground” and indeed can now be seen to be potentially “subversive of international society itself”.<sup>22</sup> Despite the obvious moral ambiguity attached to this position, Bull was clear that it was essential for order to take priority over justice. However, towards the end of his life, he began to reconsider this position and recognised that there was a need to rectify the imbalance between the rich and the poor states within the system. Justice demands, Bull argued, that the West abandon “positions of undue privilege”.<sup>23</sup>

### **Assessing the post-Cold War world**

The English School starts from the premise that its pluralistic framework makes it possible to examine international relations at any point in world history. So its members assert that they can make some sense of the post-Cold War world . . .

#### ***Military intervention and the international system***

Military intervention was as much a feature of the bipolar Cold War era as it has proved to be in the post-Cold War world. From an English School perspective, however, these interventions need to be characterised in very different terms because the structures of the two periods are quite different. In contrast to the American realists, however, who focus primarily on the distribution of military power to characterise international structure, highlighting the shift from bipolarity to unipolarity, the English School draw on both system and society to distinguish the two periods. . . . With the demise of the Soviet Union, however, the potential for a much thicker international society across the globe has emerged.

The English School approach to structure opens up a more complex assessment of the military interventions that occurred during these two periods. During the Cold War, military moves made by either the United States or the Soviet Union were assessed primarily in terms of their impact on a systemic balance of power or the need to defend their respective international societies. Soviet moves in Africa in the 1970s, but more especially in Afghanistan at the end of that decade, were viewed with alarm by the United States, for example, because of their potential impact on the distribution of power in the international system. The moves by one super-power were also drawn upon to justify the moves of the other . . .

In the post-Cold War era, military responses by the United States and other states have been evaluated in very different terms. The impact of a potential intervention on the global distribution of power has not been an issue. Instead, attention has focused on whether the rights of states or individuals should be given priority. So, the focus has not been on how a potential intervention would affect the military preponderance of the United States, but rather on whether the sovereign rights of a state should be observed, or whether the protection of individuals within the state should be privileged. There is substantial controversy and ambiguity surrounding this choice in the international community and this controversy and ambiguity is reflected within the English School. On the one hand, support persists for a pluralist vision, premised on the assumption that a society of states creates, as Sorensen

observes, “the freedom for citizens of individual states to pursue their preferred versions of the good life”, but he goes on to note that this vision ignores the fact that “the sovereignty games of postcolonial and postmodern states have changed the conditions for the good life in major parts of the world in such a way that the creation of political goods has acquired an explicit international dimension”.<sup>24</sup> The latter position leads to what the English School identifies as solidarist solutions that give priority to the rights of individuals over the rights of states.<sup>25</sup>

Since 11 September 2001, however, the debate has moved on again. The current concern in the West is less about individual vs. state rights and much more about the need to preserve the *status quo* which is being threatened by groups with very different visions of the future than those entertained by elites within the Western world. The debate now centres on tensions between systemic order and the societal rights of states when the threat to international society is coming from within world society. . . . The basic point is . . . that the American realists are unable to explain why interventions in the Cold War were always justified in security terms . . . whereas the post-Cold War interventions have been defended in humanitarian terms. Although the English School is deeply divided, at least they have a handle on the issue.

## Conclusion

Once attention is turned to important issues that exist in the post-Cold War world, it quickly becomes apparent how underdeveloped English School thinking is in some significant areas. In many ways it has not progressed further than classical realism. On the other hand, it has not regressed. The key insights contained in classical realism have all been carried over into English School thinking. And in many ways these insights are much more clearly signposted than ever they were in classical realism. By contrast, the American realists have only focused on one dimension of classical realism. As a consequence, they have produced a muscle-bound approach that distorts the reality of international politics—producing what Freedman refers to as “unreal” realism.<sup>26</sup>

The American realists, however, are unimpressed by criticisms of this kind. They insist that their theory and methodology are unambiguous and amenable to empirical testing. By contrast, the approach adopted by members of the English School is considered fatally flawed, because of methodological and theoretical deficiencies. On the methodological front, Copeland argues, the English School has never succeeded in drawing a clear distinction between dependent and independent variables. Moreover, even if it is accepted that the English School prefers to adopt an interpretive methodology, designed to reveal the intersubjective world of decisionmakers, Copeland insists that they have failed to follow through and conduct research on this basis.

The English School is seen to be just as weak on the theoretical front. Indeed, Copeland comes close to arguing that there is no theory underpinning the English School approach and he feels obliged to identify the theoretical route that the English School should follow by pointing to a possible causal relationship between international society and cooperation. But to make progress, he insists, the English School are going to have to specify the nature of this causal relationship in much more detail than they have so far done. This suggestion, however, indicates the existence of a yawning gulf in understanding between the English School and the American realists.

What the American realists fail to take on board is the scale of the agenda set by the English School, which has always worked on a very broad historical canvas, extending

across millennia. Viewing international relations from this perspective, it becomes clear that the anarchic international system is a rather unusual structure. Indeed, anarchy is considered very fragile, almost invariably giving way to hierarchy. The American realists do not begin to address this question, but simply assume that anarchy is a robust structure that does not need to be explained. By taking a world historical perspective, the English School raise different and more fundamental questions to the ones posed by the American realists. When members of the English School focus on the European international system, therefore, what they find intriguing is the fact that it has proved to be so enduring and that it had the capacity to extend across the globe. It is the enduring and expansionist dimensions of the system that need to be explained. In fact, Copeland's attempt to provide a theoretical signpost for the English School points in the wrong direction. The American realists take for granted what the English School finds most intriguing.

The starting assumption of members of the English School is that the European state system was able to survive and expand because of its distinctive institutions. Bull, for example, points to the emergence of a set of great powers with a self-conscious and mutual interest in international order, the growth of international law, the distinctive diplomatic framework, the conception of limited war and the mutual interest in a balance of power. By restricting themselves to an ahistorical framework, the American realists do not take on board the really interesting theoretical questions that history throws up, and, as a consequence, they set about dealing with what the English School views as a second order problem.

By the same token, when the American realists insist that their power theory shows why it is that state interests trump international norms, from an English School perspective, this way of defining the problem is the equivalent of looking down the wrong end of a telescope. It fails to appreciate how influential international norms are when it comes to the constitution of state interests. The American realists establish a false dichotomy between state interests and international norms. Interests shape norms and norms shape interests, from an English School perspective. The problem with denying the mutual constitution of norms and interests becomes apparent when we return to the question of why unipolarity has persisted in the post-Cold War era. Glaser suggests that it is because the United States is not perceived as a threat by other major powers in the system. But he does not explain why the United States is seen to be a benign state. By contrast, Copeland circumvents the question of why unipolarity has persisted and argues that in an effort to maintain its dominant position, the United States has regularly flouted commonly accepted norms. But he fails to identify which norms have been flouted. From an English School perspective, however, both of these assessments fail to take on board the extent to which the United States has endeavoured to convince the world that it is primarily interested in promoting international order. Of course, the United States has made moves that have been seen to confirm the idea of US exceptionalism, for example, refusing to sign up to the idea of an International Criminal Court, or to ratify the Kyoto Treaty, but the United States is not under any legal obligation to agree to either of these international developments. The refusal to cooperate in these areas is simply an exercise of sovereignty. Unipolarity persists, therefore, because the other major powers have accepted that the United States has no intention of using its military might to overthrow the established norms that constitute international society. By the same token, however, the United States can also be seen to have been restrained by the potential for balancing in the international system. It remains to be seen if this assessment persists in the wake of the 2003 war in Iraq.

Nevertheless, there is potentially some scope for a meeting of minds between American realism and the English School. Certainly the English School acknowledges that there must

be provision for a realist voice, and it is acknowledged that there are occasions when the realist voice prevails. In other words, the assessment of international politics advanced by American realists does sometimes determine the policies pursued by states. But although members of the English School can acknowledge that they share a common language with the American realists, they insist that other voices also have to be registered. There are voices insisting that established norms must be defended and observed and other voices arguing that the norms need to be changed to accommodate transformations that are taking place in world politics. These voices can be associated with the international system, international society, and world society, although it can be argued that the voices are seen by the English School to be registered within international society. So international society is not simply defined by a prevailing set of norms and values but also by the “conversation” that takes place amongst ongoing modes of thought.<sup>27</sup> The English School has the potential to produce a meeting of minds amongst the various schools of thought in international relations. But to realise this potential, and produce a common language, there will have to be much more work carried out not only on the theoretical framework, but also the methodology that is required to sustain this inherently pluralistic approach to world politics.<sup>28</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 10.
- 2 Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th edn (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), p. 174.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 256.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 225.
- 5 Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, p. 107.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 100.
- 7 Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society: A Comparative Historical Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1992).
- 8 Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, p. 273.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 273. Where international law is seen to have failed is in the attempts to eliminate war from the international system and establish an element of international government. Morgenthau was extremely sceptical about the utility of using international law to try to make progress on these fronts because international law, like diplomacy, is an international institution that is designed to sustain a society of sovereign states. It is through international law and diplomacy that the society of states is constantly being reproduced. By contrast, a world with an effective international government that could police the system would no longer constitute a society of sovereign states. From a classical realist perspective, therefore, because diplomacy and international law are designed to protect the sovereign state, they are unlikely to be effective when it comes to introducing measures that are designed to undermine the sovereign state.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 219.
- 11 Price argues that this is how Thucydides characterises the Peloponnesian War. See Jonathan J. Price: *Thucydides and Internal War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
- 12 See G. Schwarzenberger, *Power Politics*, 3rd edn. (London: Stevens and Co., 1964), p. 203; and K. W. Thompson, *Political Realism and the Crisis of World Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), p. 169.
- 13 Andrew Hurrell, “International Society and the Study of Regimes: A Reflective Approach” in V. Rittberger (ed.), *Regime Theory and International Relations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 55.
- 14 See Ole Wæver, “Four Meanings of International Society: A Transatlantic Dialogue”, in B. A. Roberson (ed.), *International Society and the Development of International Relations Theory* (London and Washington: Pinter, 1998), p. 90 who argues, however, that the arguments enumerated by the English School have the potential to take us much further than the liberal institutionalists who only investigate one item on the list. Moreover they focus on individual rules. He goes on (p. 91) “Often the general interest in international society is important in explaining compliance



with specific rules, while the specific rules add up to a general system of international law that is constitutive of the structure of the state-system itself. Because states come to believe that they have a long-term interest in this international legal system, the rules achieve obligation and normativity in a way which becomes more law-like and where compliance is hard to calculate in terms of specific and calculable interests."

- 15 Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, ch. 29. Morgenthau refers to a world community rather than a world society. See Barry Buzan, "From International System to International Society: Structural Theory and Regime Theory Meet the English School", *International Organization*, 47:3 (1993), pp. 327–52, who takes this distinction seriously. He is currently working on a book that uses this distinction to clarify English School thinking.
- 16 Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, ch. 30. See also David Mitrany, *The Functional Theory of Politics* (London: Robertson, 1975).
- 17 Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, p. 152.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 317.
- 19 Thomas Diez and Richard Whitman, "Analysing European Integration: Reflecting on the English School", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40:1 (2002), pp. 43–67, p. 49.
- 20 In fact this issue is debated within the English School, because some argue that it is not possible to have a concept of order that makes no provision for justice. See Ian Harris, "Order and Justice in *The Anarchical Society*", *International Affairs*, 69:4 (1993), pp. 725–41.
- 21 Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 78.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 183.
- 23 "Justice in International Relations: The 1983 Hagey Lectures" in Kai Alderson and Andrew Hurrell, *Hedley Bull on International Society* (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), p. 244.
- 24 Georg Sorensen, *Changes in Statehood: The Transformation of International Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 171–2.
- 25 Nicholas J. Wheeler "Pluralist or Solidarist Contentions of International Society: Bull and Vincent on Humanitarian Intervention" *Millennium*, 21:3 (1992), pp. 463–87. The debate between pluralists and solidarists persists. See Robert Jackson *The Global Covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), and James Mayall, *World Politics: Progress and Its Limits* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), for the pluralist case, and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) for the solidarist case. However, it is still often assumed that the English School favours pluralist solutions. Mohammed Ayoob, for example, calls upon the English School to reinforce his argument that it is essential to defend the rights of states in "Inequality and Theorising in International Relations: The Case for Subaltern Realism", *International Studies Review*, 4:3 (2002), pp. 27–48. But see also Michael Barnett's very critical and essentially solidarist response "Radical Chic? Subaltern Realist: A Rejoinder" *International Studies Review*, 4:3 (2002), pp. 48–62.
- 26 Lawrence Freedman review of Nicholas J. Wheeler, *Saving Strangers*, in *International Affairs*, 77:1 (2001), pp. 174–5.
- 27 The English School, however, have traditionally not been good at exploring the methodological implications of their position. Pluralists have tended to focus on the *verstehen* method. See Robert Jackson, *The Global Covenant*. But attention has also been drawn to the importance of a pluralistic approach to methodology if the richness of the English School is going to be encompassed. See Richard Little "The English School's Contribution to the Study of International Relations", *European Journal of International Relations*, 6:3 (2000), pp. 395–422.
- 28 One possible avenue that might be worth exploring is the philosophy of Michael Oakeshott, who defined civilisation in terms of a conversation. For an excellent discussion, see Terry Nardin, *The Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).

# A realist critique of the English School

*Dale C. Copeland*

From: *Review of International Studies* 29 (2003): 427–441.

Over the past decade, the English School of International Relations (IR) has made a remarkable resurgence. Countless articles and papers have been written on the School.<sup>1</sup> Some of these works have been critical, but most have applauded the School's efforts to provide a fruitful "middle way" for IR theory, one that avoids the extremes of either an unnecessarily pessimistic realism or a naively optimistic idealism. At the heart of this *via media* is the idea that, in many periods of history, states exist within an international society of shared rules and norms that conditions their behaviour in ways that could not be predicted by looking at material power structures alone. If the English School (ES) is correct that states often follow these rules and norms even when their power positions and security interests dictate alternative policies, then American realist theory—a theory that focuses on power and security drives as primary causal forces in global politics—has been dealt a potentially serious blow.

This article will argue that American realism remains a more useful starting point than the English School for building strong explanatory and predictive IR theory. From the realist perspective, there are two major problems with the English School as it is currently constituted. The first has to do with its lack of clarity as a putative theory of international politics. For American social scientists, it is difficult to figure out what exactly the School is trying to explain, what its causal logic is, or how one would go about measuring its core independent (causal) variable, "international society". As it stands, the English School is less a theory that provides falsifiable hypotheses to be tested (or that have been tested) than a vague approach to thinking about and conceptualising world politics. It offers descriptions of international societies through history and some weakly defined hypotheses associating these societies with greater cooperation in the system, but not much else. This does not mean that the School could not build on its suggestive descriptions and initial hypotheses to develop a rigorous and testable theory of international relations. Yet up to the present time, little work has been done to further this objective.

The second problem from the realist standpoint concerns the idea that international societies of shared rules and norms play a significant role in pushing states towards greater cooperation than one would expect from examining realist theories alone. As I will show, the English School ignores key implications of anarchy that any theory of international relations must grapple with—in particular, the impact of leaders' uncertainty about the present and future intentions of other states. Leaders must worry that the other state is not as benign as its diplomatic claims to moderation might suggest. That is, they worry that the other will try to cheat on current rules or ignore them when the material conditions change in its favour—and at the extreme, launch a premeditated attack. Yet even when leaders are fairly sure that the other is currently a cooperative actor, they know that the other may change its spots later

on. States must therefore worry that the other will use any growth in power that it acquires through cooperation to harm their security and interests in the future. Because the English School has not tackled these issues (in contrast to American institutionalist approaches), it provides few insights into how uncertainty about the other state's behaviour can be moderated in an anarchical environment. The School thus cannot say when and under what conditions international societal norms will or will not have an effect on state behaviour . . .

### **What exactly is the “theory” of the English School?**

In American political science, significant disagreements exist regarding the correct procedure for the building, testing, and refining of theories of international relations. The majority of US-based political scientists would agree, however, that any proper theory must at the very least do one thing: it must specify what it is that the theory is trying to explain (the dependent variable), what causal or independent variable(s) the theory will employ to explain the dependent variable, and what causal mechanism or causal logic links the two (that is, *why* do changes in the independent variable lead to changes in the dependent variable?).<sup>2</sup> In short, a theory must answer in a coherent fashion the question “what explains what, and why?”<sup>3</sup>

There is indeed a general causal argument that floats through the literature of the English School: that international societies lead to greater cooperation and order among states. On the surface, this seems to be the kind of testable statement of causal connection that appeals to American political scientists. Nevertheless, there are a number of obstacles that stand in the way of saying that the English School approach actually has a theory embedded in it. First, for the majority of articles and books listed on Buzan's comprehensive bibliography of the English School (fn. 1), it is frustratingly difficult to identify any dependent variable at all. Many of these pieces seem more interested in establishing the history of the School (how it developed, who is “in” or “out”), in discussing different ways of conceiving the core concepts (for example, international society vs. international system), or in providing exegetical points on the founding fathers (what did Wight or Bull really say?).<sup>4</sup> Such efforts may be important ground-clearing exercises for the development of theory, but they are not theories themselves. Without knowing clearly what it is that is being explained, there is simply no way of gathering evidence to support or disconfirm a particular author's position.

Second, even when it is fairly clear that an author is seeking to account for cooperation or non-cooperation in a system, the measures used to evaluate changes in the independent variable, “international society”, are very often problematic. When ES scholars are self-aware on this issue, they invariably agree with Bull that the degree to which a system exhibits elements of a “society” must ultimately be measured by *elite perceptions* of this society of rules and norms.<sup>5</sup> This would fit with the point that the English School is, by its nature, driven by a largely interpretative methodology; as with constructivism, because rules and norms are intersubjectively shared ideas, one must examine as well as possible the way leaders thought, rather than their external behaviour. It is a striking fact, therefore, that there are very few studies within the English School that carefully examine the diplomatic documents needed to expose the beliefs and values that elites held prior to actions. Well-known book-length studies written or edited by Adam Watson and Hedley Bull, for example, rely largely or almost exclusively on descriptions of the international society in terms of the type of institutions that states joined and their diplomatic interactions, rather than on leader perceptions.<sup>6</sup> For a school that prides itself on offering a “historical” approach to international

relations, there are surprisingly few diplomatic-historical analyses that extensively utilise archival sources or documentary collections.<sup>7</sup> This leads to a severe testing problem: we have a hard time knowing whether leaders truly thought the way the English School expects that they should have thought, that is, whether leaders were aware of international societal norms and took them into account when they acted. No true test of the School's approach can be achieved without this information.<sup>8</sup>

Yet the problem here is potentially more fundamental. Because ES scholars are not measuring the degree of "international society-ness" *via* elite perceptions, they typically fall back on measures that reflect the *behaviour* of states—for example, the number of agreements actors sign, the extent to which states form institutions, diplomatic pronouncements of states' willingness to work with each other, and so forth.<sup>9</sup> Such a technique poses a significant risk of measuring the independent variable by what happens on the dependent variable, that is, of finding high levels of international society-ness because one observes high levels of behavioural cooperation. This leaves us unable to test the theory at all (it becomes "unfalsifiable"), since for every move from cooperation to non-cooperation the analyst can argue that the intensity of the international society has dropped correspondingly. It has, but only because the level of interstate cooperation is simultaneously used to measure the independent variable! The dependent and independent variables collapse into one thing—the degree of cooperative behaviour in the system—and we are left simply with a description of changes in the level of international order over time, rather than a causal explanation as to *why* this level varies . . .

### **The English School and the problem of anarchy**

The English School, following the lead of one of its seminal figures, Hedley Bull, has stressed that the international system is an "anarchical society": that it is both anarchic and an international society at the same time. Unfortunately, ES scholars, in their rush to uphold the importance of the societal dimensions of the system, have consistently ignored the profound implications of anarchy for this society's ability to affect state behaviour.<sup>10</sup> For realists, anarchy—as the lack of a central authority hanging above states to protect them and to enforce rules and norms—means above all else that great powers must constantly worry about the chance that other great powers will attack them, if not tomorrow then perhaps in the foreseeable future.<sup>11</sup> It is this uncertainty that states have about the present and especially the future intentions of others that makes the levels and trends of relative power such critical causal variables for realists. In the face of the potentially hostile intentions of others, states become concerned with power as the means to safeguard security.

State uncertainty about both present and future intentions underpins the realist concept of the security dilemma. Two states, A and B, may both be only seeking security. Yet given the difficulty of seeing the other's motives (the "problem of other minds"), state A worries that state B harbours non-security motives for war. Hence, if B takes steps only for its security, these steps may be misinterpreted by A as preparations for aggression. State A's counter-efforts, in turn, will very likely be misinterpreted by B as moves to aggression, sparking a spiral of mistrust and hostility.<sup>12</sup> The problem of future intentions is even more intractable. Even when states A and B are both fairly certain that the other is at present a security seeker, they have reason to worry that the other may become aggressive some years later as a result of a change of leadership, a revolution, or simply a change of heart resulting from an increase in power. Thus both states will be aware of the importance of protecting their power position as insurance against a future threat.<sup>13</sup> A state that faces exogenous decline in relative power

will be particularly unsettled, since it will fear being attacked later when it has less power and therefore less ability to defend itself.<sup>14</sup>

American realists divide into two main camps—offensive realism and defensive realism—with regard to the implications of anarchy and uncertainty for state behaviour. Both sides agree that anarchy forces states to be concerned primarily with maximising their security, and that power is a primary means to achieving this security. Offensive realists, however, emphasise state uncertainty regarding future intentions, contending that states must always be ready to grab opportunities to increase their power as a hedge against future threats. This leads to a prediction of a highly competitive international system, one where norms and rules within an international society play little role in guiding behaviour.<sup>15</sup> Defensive realists are not quite as pessimistic. They focus on the problem of uncertain present intentions and the risk that, within the security dilemma, hard-line policies will be countered by others' balancing actions and may even lead to an escalation into war. More cooperative policies are thus generally the most rational means to security maximisation (although if the system favours offensive strikes, defensive realists predict behaviour more in line with offensive realist hypotheses).<sup>16</sup>

For both types of realists, however, ES scholars remain naïve about the true forces that produce either cooperation or conflict between states. Realists see two problems with the ES argument that international societal norms and rules promote greater cooperation. First, states will worry that others will cheat on or manipulate the shared rules and norms to achieve benefits at their expense. Hitler's use of the principle of self-determination for ethnic groups to justify his takeovers of Austria and the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia in 1938 is but one example. The most extreme worry, of course, is that the other will "cheat" by launching an unprovoked attack. For realists, international societal norms provide little restraining power against an adversary bent on war—witness the numerous great power wars that have broken out since 1648 and the widespread acceptance of norms of sovereignty. Second, leaders will be concerned that cooperation will help further the relative power of potential adversaries. This "relative gains" concern has been prevalent throughout the history of great power politics, and for realists it generally leads states to reduce their level of economic and military cooperation. Even today many officials in the United States worry that China will use its participation in world economic institutions to develop its long-term relative strength *vis-à-vis* America . . .<sup>17</sup>

As a consequence of its side-stepping of realist concerns, the English School has difficulty explaining fluctuations in the level of cooperation over time. Consider the conflicts of the twentieth century. Hedley Bull and Adam Watson argue that the European-based international society reached its highest level of universality in the European colonial period prior to 1945.<sup>18</sup> Yet this is also a period which saw two world wars and numerous bilateral struggles. The School also offers little help in explaining the ups and downs of the US-Soviet relationship during the Cold War, for the simple reason that the Soviet Union is typically said to have been outside the international society altogether. Realists however can point to power trends and both sides' uncertainty about the other's intentions as major causes of the ongoing conflict.<sup>19</sup> Moves towards cooperation in the 1970s can also be explained: the superpowers did not suddenly discover international norms, but simply recognised the need for restraint in an era of mutually assured destruction . . .<sup>20</sup>

Once we incorporate realism's concern regarding the uncertainty of state intentions, we see the limitations of both pluralist and solidarist arguments. The solidarist call for intervention in the name of universal human rights is fraught with difficulties. Even when the intervening state is truly seeking to safeguard human rights, there is always the issue of

convincing *other* actors of this state's humanitarian objectives. The security dilemma and the problem of other minds creep back in: when state A intervenes against state C, how is state B to know A's true motives? What may be perceived by A as a noble act may very likely be seen by B as a move to improve A's geopolitical position and further an expansionistic programme. Consider three of the cases presented by solidarist Nicholas Wheeler: the Indian intervention in Bangladesh in 1971, the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1979, and the US action against Kosovo in 1999.<sup>21</sup> Indian support for Bangladeshi secessionists led directly to war with Pakistan. The Vietnamese action to eliminate the Kymer Rouge regime undermined the confidence of regional states and sparked a punitive military attack by China. The American-led NATO intervention on the side of ethnic Albanian Kosovars against the government in Serbia did not lead to war expansion, but it did heighten the suspicions of Russian and Chinese governments while giving both states greater justification for their own future interventions in neighbouring states.

Pluralists are well aware that the solidarist position can lead to an undermining of peace and order (they are, after all, close to the realist end of the spectrum on many issues). Yet the pluralists have not developed a causal theory to explain why actions by state A that are viewed by A as non-threatening moves in support of international societal norms might not be seen as so moderate by others. And because they have not, they cannot establish the conditions under which states *can* communicate their benign intentions and avoid conflict spirals. Defensive realists, by contrast, have recently drawn upon game theory and games of incomplete information to show not only the difficulty in communicating good intentions in anarchy, but also how it occasionally can be done. States that send "costly signals"—taking actions that states with aggressive intentions would not have done—can help moderate the security dilemma and secure more cooperative relations.<sup>22</sup>

Pluralists, by emphasising the differences between sovereign states and their right to maintain those differences, also seem unaware that such a pluralism can increase the level of uncertainty in the system. States with different ideologies are, according to pluralism, guaranteed the right to exist by the shared norms of interstate sovereignty. Yet as we saw during the Cold War, the ideological divide between the United States and the Soviet Union, and the United States and China, exacerbated the already profound security dilemmas between these powers. Any military buildups by the Soviet Union or China were viewed with great suspicion in Washington, as American buildups were in Moscow and Beijing. The fear on both sides was the classic one outlined by realism: should the other grow in relative power, it might become more aggressive and less deterrable. Destabilising arms races were the result. Even after the US-Russian and US-Chinese *détentes* in the 1970s when Russia and China were integrated more fully into international society, deep suspicions remained. Today, Washington elites are still wary of China, precisely because it is a growing and non-democratic power with the long-term potential to challenge US predominance, at least in the east Asian theatre.

Systems founded on pluralist norms, in short, may be less inclined to destabilising interventions to promote ideological homogeneity, but they suffer from the uncertainty resulting from the continuation of political differences between actors.<sup>23</sup> Either way, pluralist and solidarist systems contain high levels of uncertainty. Until the two camps within the English School grapple with how this uncertainty impedes cooperation and the conditions under which such uncertainty might be mitigated, the School will be left with an empty optimism founded on little more than a hunch that international society matters . . .



## Notes

- 1 For an extensive bibliography on the English School organised by Barry Buzan, see the English School website at <<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/lpolis/englishschool/>>. Given length restrictions on a forum essay, this article references only a sample of English School works.
- 2 Constructivist theorists would include constitutive arguments in addition to purely causal ones. See Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 77–88.
- 3 Again, one should not feel that the paper is imposing American social science standards by using the language of “variables” and “causal logic”. Any argument that seeks to explain (as opposed to merely describe) something of interest—whether it is why nations cooperate or why Bill went to the store yesterday—implicitly or explicitly must establish what it is that is being explained, what factors explain it, and why these factors lead to the outcome observed.
- 4 Representative examples include Timothy Dunne, *Inventing International Society: A History of the English School* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1998); Timothy Dunne, “New Thinking on International Society”, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 3:2 (2001), pp. 223–44; Alan James, “System or Society?”, *Review of International Studies*, 19 (1993), pp. 269–88; Adam Watson, “Hedley Bull, States Systems, and International Societies”, *Review of International Studies*, 13 (1987), pp. 147–53; Kai Alderson and Andrew Hurrell, *Hedley Bull on International Society* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1999); and essays by Tonny Brems Knudsen, Samuel M. Makinda, Hidemi Suganami, and Tim Dunne in the symposia on Dunne’s *Inventing International Society*, in *Conflict and Cooperation*, 35:2 (2000) and 36:3 (2001).
- 5 Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 40–41; Peter Wilson, “The English School of International Relations: A Reply to Sheila Grader”, *Review of International Studies*, 15 (1989), p. 53; Tony Evans and Peter Wilson, “Regime Theory and the English School of International Relations: A Comparison”, *Millennium* 21:3 (1992), p. 333. On the English School’s difficulties in measuring the extent and intensity of an international society, or even knowing that one exists, see Roy Jones, “The English School: A Case for Closure”, *Review of International Studies*, 7 (1981), pp. 4–5; Martha Finnemore, “Exporting the English School?”, *Review of International Studies*, 27:3 (2001), pp. 509–510.
- 6 Hedley Bull and Adam Watson (eds.), *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984); Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society* (London: Routledge, 1992); Bull, *Anarchical Society*.
- 7 Two books that stand out in terms of providing more in-depth historical narrative—Nicholas J. Wheeler’s *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and Yonglin Zhang’s *China in International Society Since 1949* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1998)—nevertheless offer few statements on the internal elite perceptions of international societal norms. Thus whether elites strongly believed in these norms can only be inferred, not demonstrated. (A stronger ES work in this regard is David Armstrong’s *Revolution and World Order* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1993]). American constructivists, to whom ES scholars are quite sympathetic, have done a much better job at thorough and often original documentary work. See, for example, Peter Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Emanuel Alder and Michael Barnett (eds.), *Security Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and the special issue of *Security Studies* on the origins of national interests, 8:2–3 (1998–99). Recent realist work also draws extensively from the documents. See William Curti Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); Stephen M. Walt, *Revolution and War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); Randall L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).
- 8 One may argue that for many of the historical cases prior to 1600, the documents are too few and far between to allow proper testing. This is correct, and in such situations, historical inferences may have to substitute for archival work. Yet this does not excuse the lack of diplomatic-historical work for periods when documents abound.
- 9 See esp. Adam Watson, *Evolution of International Society* (London: Routledge, 1992); Bull and Watson, *The Expansion of International Society*.
- 10 The exception to this rule is the work of Barry Buzan and Richard Little. Buzan and Little have written extensively about anarchy and its effects and have also been active supporters of the English

- School. In addition to the citations above, see Barry Buzan, Charles Jones, and Richard Little, *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Buzan and Little, *International Systems in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Barry Buzan, *People, States, and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, 2nd edn. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1991); Buzan and Eric Herring, *The Arms Dynamic in World Politics* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998); Little, "Neorealism and the English School: A Methodological, Ontological, and Theoretical Reassessment", *European Journal of International Relations*, 1:1 (1995), pp. 9–34. Note, however, that even these two accomplished scholars have not yet shown how the concerns of structural realism which are discussed below might limit or undermine the significance of global norms and the value of the School's international society approach, nor how realist concerns might be mitigated through ES counterarguments. Buzan does discuss the security dilemma in *People, States, and Fear*, ch. 8, but he does not relate it to the English School and the problem of sustaining cooperation via an international society.
- 11 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979). The realist focus on great powers is straightforward: small states within any system often do have bodyguards and enforcers of rules—the great powers! Because small states typically do not exist in pure anarchy, they can often shirk actions that shape the world order and instead rest on appeals to shared norms. This is a luxury that great powers usually cannot afford (unless those norms serve their interests).
  - 12 See inter alia Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma", *World Politics*, 30: 2 (1978), pp. 167–214; Charles L. Glaser, "The Security Dilemma Revisited", *World Politics*, 50:1 (1997), pp. 171–201.
  - 13 Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 62; John Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions", *International Security*, 19:3 (1994–95), p. 10.
  - 14 Copeland, *Origins of Major War*, ch. 1.
  - 15 John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001); Mearsheimer, "False Promise of International Institutions"; Eric Labs, "Beyond Victory: Offensive Realism and the Expansion of War Aims", *Security Studies*, 6:4 (1997), pp. 1–49.
  - 16 See Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma"; Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War. Power and the Root of Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987); Charles L. Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help", *International Security*, 19:3 (1994–95), pp. 50–90. For an argument that integrates offensive and defensive realist insights, see Copeland, *Origins of Major War*, ch. 2; Copeland, "Theory and History in the Study of Major War", *Security Studies*, 10:4 (2001), pp. 212–16. For additional references on the two camps, see Jeffrey Taliaferro, "Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited", *International Security*, 25: 3 (2000–2001), pp. 128–61.
  - 17 Joseph M. Grieco, "Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism", *International Organization*, 42 (1988), pp. 485–507; Mearsheimer, "False Promise of International Institutions"; Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, ch. 6.
  - 18 Samuel Huntington's thesis on the clash of civilisations would reinforce this point: the withdrawal of European colonial powers from the southern hemisphere left independent states with cultural values and aspirations that were very different from the established Western powers, particularly in the Middle East and the Far East. Indeed, Huntington's thesis, even if only partially correct, would call into question any ES claims that states currently exist within a universal international society. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).
  - 19 For a discussion of realist accounts of World War I, World War II, and the Cold War, and an attempt to provide a better, more dynamic realist argument, see Copeland, *Origins of Major War*, chs.3–7.
  - 20 Note that Henry Kissinger, a realist academic, was the individual instrumental in achieving this détente.
  - 21 Wheeler, *Saving Strangers*.
  - 22 James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War", *International Organization*, 49: 3 (1995), pp. 379–414; Glaser, "Realists as Optimists"; Andrew Kydd, "Sheep in Sheep's Clothing: Why Security Seekers Do Not Fight Each Other", *Security Studies*, 7:1 (1997), pp. 139–47.
  - 23 Solidarists might claim that *if* the system became completely homogeneous—at least on the Western democratic model—it would be very peaceful. Along the lines of democratic peace theory

and the arguments of Francis Fukuyama, a system with only democracies would have greater certainty about the good intentions of others—see Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon, 1992); Michael E. Brown, Sean M. Lynn-Jones, and Steven E. Miller (eds.), *Debating the Democratic Peace* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996). Yet in the *transition* to this homogeneous world, the very effort to promote democracy through intervention would increase the suspicions of non-democratic states, exacerbating the security dilemma.

This page intentionally left blank

## **Section Three**

# **Realist theories and contemporary international politics**

This page intentionally left blank



## 12 Realism, American hegemony, and soft balancing

After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the United States became the world's only remaining superpower. A new era of unipolarity replaced the bipolar structure that had shaped international relations for nearly fifty years. Following the Cold War, many realist scholars anticipated that U.S. hegemony would not last long, and that the international system would soon become multipolar. Their predictions were grounded in a balance of power logic shared by several structural realist accounts: if too much power is accumulated by any one state, this will cause countervailing coalitions to form and result in a balance of power being restored in the international system. Following this reasoning, for the most part realists dismissed American hegemony as a "moment" that would soon pass.

Not surprisingly, the continuation of U.S. hegemony more than twenty years later might be considered to be a serious anomaly for the strands of realism that anticipate a tendency toward equilibrium in the international system. Realists have responded in a number of ways to the charge that the current unipolar system challenges their positions. Some have suggested that American hegemony is not a puzzle at all, because realist theories can be used to explain why unipolarity has been so durable. Others within the tradition, including Kenneth Waltz and Christopher Layne, have suggested that a return to a more balanced system is simply a matter of time, and continue to predict that the clock is running out for unipolarity. Others concede that the balancing of U.S. power through traditional means, such as military alliances and arms build-ups, is not likely to occur any time soon, but still insist that states are actively trying to challenge U.S. supremacy. According to the "soft-balancing" school, states that lack the material power to challenge the U.S. head on have used other economic, political, and diplomatic means to undermine or frustrate the U.S. as it tries to achieve its foreign policy goals.

Each of these views is represented in the readings for this chapter. In a selection from his article "The stability of a unipolar world," William Wohlforth challenges the structural realist contention that unipolarity is a highly unstable system configuration. Wohlforth uses principles from balance of power theory and the rise and fall research program to predict that U.S. hegemony will be peaceful and long lasting. Wohlforth maintains that the enormous power advantage enjoyed by the U.S. and its geographic isolation will mean that European and Asian powers will not confront the U.S. or attempt to balance its power. Instead, these countries are more liable to be worried about each other, and more concerned about maintaining a balance in their own regions.

Christopher Layne counters Wohlforth's optimistic view of unipolarity and defends his prediction of a return toward equilibrium. In a selection from his article "The unipolar illusion revisited," Layne insists that, despite the democratic nature of the U.S. political system and the country's active participation in multilateral institutions, the massive

concentration of power in the U.S. *is* threatening to other states. Accordingly, several states are acting to restore balance in the international system. Layne cites the tremendous growth of power in both China and India in recent years as evidence that unipolarity is now giving way to a multipolar international system.

In contrast to Layne, Robert Pape suggests that European and Asian states have not yet engaged in traditional, or “hard,” balancing against U.S. power. Instead, they have adopted “soft” balancing techniques as a means of upsetting American hegemony. Pape argues that, while they are not trying to match the U.S. on measures of material strength, second-tier powers are nevertheless trying to complicate and increase the costs of U.S. hegemony through the use of political, economic, and diplomatic strategies. These include the denial of the use of territory for U.S. military missions and the establishment of regional trading blocs. Pape points to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the international backlash that accompanied it, as the start of widespread soft balancing against American power.

In a selection from their article “Waiting for balance,” Keir Lieber and Gerard Alexander challenge Pape’s assertion that recent international reactions to U.S. foreign policy equate to the balancing of U.S. power through non-traditional means. According to Lieber and Alexander, with a few exceptions, states have supported U.S. hegemony. The authors argue that the few disagreements that have occurred between the U.S. and its European and Asian counterparts have been nothing more than normal diplomatic friction. Thus, according to Lieber and Alexander, what Pape calls soft balancing is not balancing at all. It is, rather, the normal course of everyday international politics.

# The stability of a unipolar world

*William C. Wohlforth*

From: *International Security* 24, no. 1 (Summer 1999): 5–41.

The collapse of the Soviet Union produced the greatest change in world power relationships since World War II. With Moscow's headlong fall from superpower status, the bipolar structure that had shaped the security policies of the major powers for nearly half a century vanished, and the United States emerged as the sole surviving superpower. Commentators were quick to recognize that a new "unipolar moment" of unprecedented U.S. power had arrived.<sup>1</sup> In 1992 the Pentagon drafted a new grand strategy designed to preserve unipolarity by preventing the emergence of a global rival.<sup>2</sup> But the draft plan soon ran into controversy, as commentators at home and abroad argued that any effort to preserve unipolarity was quixotic and dangerous.<sup>3</sup> Officials quickly backed away from the idea and now eschew the language of primacy or predominance, speaking instead of the United States as a "leader" or the "indispensable nation."<sup>4</sup>

The rise and sudden demise of an official strategy for preserving primacy lends credence to the widespread belief that unipolarity is dangerous and unstable. While scholars frequently discuss unipolarity, their focus is always on its demise. For neorealists, unipolarity is the least stable of all structures because any great concentration of power threatens other states and causes them to take action to restore a balance.<sup>5</sup> Other scholars grant that a large concentration of power works for peace, but they doubt that U.S. preeminence can endure.<sup>6</sup> Underlying both views is the belief that U.S. preponderance is fragile and easily negated by the actions of other states. As a result, most analysts argue that unipolarity is an "illusion," a "moment" that "will not last long," or is already "giving way to multipolarity."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, some scholars question whether the system is unipolar at all, arguing instead that it is, in Samuel Huntington's phrase, "uni-multipolar."<sup>8</sup>

Although they disagree vigorously on virtually every other aspect of post-Cold War world politics, scholars of international relations increasingly share this conventional wisdom about unipolarity. Whether they think that the current structure is on the verge of shifting away from unipolarity or that it has already done so, scholars believe that it is prone to conflict as other states seek to create a counterpoise to the overweening power of the leading state. The assumption that unipolarity is unstable has framed the wide-ranging debate over the nature of post-Cold War world politics. Since 1991 one of the central questions in dispute has been how to explain continued cooperation and the absence of old-style balance-of-power politics despite major shifts in the distribution of power.<sup>9</sup>

In this article, I advance three propositions that undermine the emerging conventional wisdom that the distribution of power is unstable and conflict prone. First, the system is unambiguously unipolar. The United States enjoys a much larger margin of superiority over the next most powerful state or, indeed, all other great powers combined than any leading state in the last two centuries. Moreover, the United States is the first leading state

in modern international history with decisive preponderance in *all* the underlying components of power: economic, military, technological, and geopolitical.<sup>10</sup> To describe this unprecedented quantitative and qualitative concentration of power as an evanescent “moment” is profoundly mistaken.

Second, the current unipolarity is prone to peace. The raw power advantage of the United States means that an important source of conflict in previous systems is absent: hegemonic rivalry over leadership of the international system. No other major power is in a position to follow any policy that depends for its success on prevailing against the United States in a war or an extended rivalry. None is likely to take any step that might invite the focused enmity of the United States. At the same time, unipolarity minimizes security competition among the other great powers. As the system leader, the United States has the means and motive to maintain key security institutions in order to ease local security conflicts and limit expensive competition among the other major powers. For their part, the second-tier states face incentives to bandwagon with the unipolar power as long as the expected costs of balancing remain prohibitive.

Third, the current unipolarity is not only peaceful but durable.<sup>11</sup> It is already a decade old, and if Washington plays its cards right, it may last as long as bipolarity. For many decades, no state is likely to be in a position to take on the United States in any of the underlying elements of power. And, as an offshore power separated by two oceans from all other major states, the United States can retain its advantages without risking a counterbalance. The current candidates for polar status (Japan, China, Germany, and Russia) are not so lucky. Efforts on their part to increase their power or ally with other dissatisfied states are likely to spark local counterbalances well before they can create a global equipoise to U.S. power.

The scholarly conventional wisdom holds that unipolarity is dynamically unstable and that any slight overstep by Washington will spark a dangerous backlash.<sup>12</sup> I find the opposite to be true: unipolarity is durable and peaceful, and the chief threat is U.S. failure to do enough.<sup>13</sup> Possessing an undisputed preponderance of power, the United States is freer than most states to disregard the international system and its incentives. But because the system is built around U.S. power, it creates demands for American engagement. The more efficiently Washington responds to these incentives and provides order, the more long-lived and peaceful the system. To be sure, policy choices are likely to affect the differential growth of power only at the margins. But given that unipolarity is safer and cheaper than bipolarity or multipolarity, it pays to invest in its prolongation. In short, the intellectual thrust (if not the details) of the Pentagon’s 1992 draft defense guidance plan was right . . .

### **Lonely at the top: the system is unipolar**

Unipolarity is a structure in which one state’s capabilities are too great to be counterbalanced.<sup>14</sup> Once capabilities are so concentrated, a structure arises that is fundamentally distinct from either multipolarity (a structure comprising three or more especially powerful states) or bipolarity (a structure produced when two states are substantially more powerful than all others). At the same time, capabilities are not so concentrated as to produce a global empire. Unipolarity should not be confused with a multi- or bipolar system containing one especially strong polar state or with an imperial system containing only one major power . . .<sup>15</sup>

### ***Quantitative comparison***

To qualify as polar powers, states must score well on *all* the components of power: size of population and territory; resource endowment; economic capabilities; military strength; and “competence,” according to Kenneth Waltz.<sup>16</sup> Two states measured up in 1990. One is gone. No new pole has appeared:  $2 - 1 = 1$ . The system is unipolar . . .

The U.S. combination of quantitative and qualitative material advantages is unprecedented, and it translates into a unique geopolitical position. Thanks to a decades-old policy of harnessing technology to the generation of military power, the U.S. comparative advantage in this area mirrors Britain’s naval preeminence in the nineteenth century. At the same time, Washington’s current brute share of great power capabilities—its aggregate potential compared with that of the next largest power or all other great powers combined—dwarfs Britain’s share in its day. The United States is the only state with global power projection capabilities; it is probably capable, if challenged, of producing defensive land-power dominance in the key theaters; it retains the world’s only truly blue-water navy; it dominates the air; it has retained a nuclear posture that may give it first-strike advantages against other nuclear powers; and it has continued to nurture decades-old investments in military logistics and command, control, communications, and intelligence. By devoting only 3 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) to defense, it outspends all other great powers combined—and most of those great powers are its close allies. Its defense R&D expenditures are probably greater than those of the rest of the world combined . . . None of the major powers is balancing; most have scaled back military expenditures faster than the United States has. One reason may be that democracy and globalization have changed the nature of world politics. Another possibility, however, is that any effort to compete directly with the United States is futile, so no one tries . . .

### **Unipolarity is peaceful**

Unipolarity favors the absence of war among the great powers and comparatively low levels of competition for prestige or security for two reasons: the leading state’s power advantage removes the problem of hegemonic rivalry from world politics, and it reduces the salience and stakes of balance-of-power politics among the major states. This argument is based on two well-known realist theories: hegemonic theory and balance-of-power theory. Each is controversial, and the relationship between the two is complex.<sup>17</sup> For the purposes of this analysis, however, the key point is that both theories predict that a unipolar system will be peaceful.

### ***How to think about unipolarity***

Hegemonic theory has received short shrift in the debate over the nature of the post-Cold War international system.<sup>18</sup> This omission is unwarranted, for the theory has simple and profound implications for the peacefulness of the post-Cold War international order that are backed up by a formidable body of scholarship. The theory stipulates that especially powerful states (“hegemons”) foster international orders that are stable until differential growth in power produces a dissatisfied state with the capability to challenge the dominant state for leadership. The clearer and larger the concentration of power in the leading state, the more peaceful the international order associated with it will be.

The key is that conflict occurs only if the leader and the challenger disagree about their relative power. That is, the leader must think itself capable of defending the status quo at the

same time that the number two state believes it has the power to challenge it. The set of perceptions and expectations necessary to produce such conflict is most likely under two circumstances: when the overall gap between the leader and the challenger is small and/or when the challenger overtakes the leader in *some* elements of national power but not others, and the two parties disagree over the relative importance of these elements. Hence both the overall size and the comprehensiveness of the leader's power advantage are crucial to peacefulness. If the system is unipolar, the great power hierarchy should be much more stable than any hierarchy lodged within a system of more than one pole. Because unipolarity is based on a historically unprecedented concentration of power in the United States, a potentially important source of great power conflict—hegemonic rivalry—will be missing.

Balance-of-power theory has been at the center of the debate, but absent so far is a clear distinction between peacefulness and durability. The theory predicts that any system comprised of states in anarchy will evince a tendency toward equilibrium. As Waltz puts it, "Unbalanced power, whoever wields it, is a potential danger to others."<sup>19</sup> This central proposition lies behind the widespread belief that unipolarity will not be durable (a contention I address below). Less often noted is the fact that as long as the system remains unipolar, balance-of-power theory predicts peace. When balance-of-power theorists argue that the post-Cold War world is headed toward conflict, they are not claiming that unipolarity causes conflict. Rather, they are claiming that unipolarity leads quickly to bi- or multipolarity. It is not unipolarity's peacefulness but its durability that is in dispute.

Waltz argued that bipolarity is less war prone than multipolarity because it reduces uncertainty. By the same logic, unipolarity is the least war prone of all structures.<sup>20</sup> For as long as unipolarity obtains, there is little uncertainty regarding alliance choices or the calculation of power. The only options available to second-tier states are to bandwagon with the polar power (either explicitly or implicitly) or, at least, to take no action that could incur its focused enmity. As long as their security policies are oriented around the power and preferences of the sole pole, second-tier states are less likely to engage in conflict prone rivalries for security or prestige. Once the sole pole takes sides, there can be little doubt about which party will prevail. Moreover, the unipolar leader has the capability to be far more interventionist than earlier system leaders. Exploiting the other states' security dependence as well as its unilateral power advantages, the sole pole can maintain a system of alliances that keeps second-tier states out of trouble.<sup>21</sup>

Until the underlying distribution of power changes, second-tier states face structural incentives similar to those of lesser states in a region dominated by one power, such as North America. The low incidence of wars in those systems is consistent with the expectations of standard, balance-of-power thinking. Otto von Bismarck earned a reputation for strategic genius by creating and managing a complex alliance system that staved off war while working disproportionately to his advantage in a multipolar setting. It does not take a Bismarck to run a Bismarckian alliance system under unipolarity. No one credits the United States with strategic genius for managing security dilemmas among American states. Such an alliance system is a structurally favored and hence less remarkable and more durable outcome in a unipolar system.

In sum, both hegemonic theory and balance-of-power theory specify thresholds at which great concentrations of power support a peaceful structure. Balance-of-power theory tells us that smaller is better.<sup>22</sup> Therefore one pole is best, and security competition among the great powers should be minimal. Hegemonic theory tells us that a clear preponderance in favor of a leading state with a comprehensive power portfolio should eliminate rivalry for primacy.



Overall, then, unipolarity generates comparatively few incentives for security or prestige competition among the great powers . . .

### **Unipolarity is durable**

Unipolarity rests on two pillars. I have already established the first: the sheer size and comprehensiveness of the power gap separating the United States from other states. This massive power gap implies that any countervailing change must be strong and sustained to produce structural effects. The second pillar—geography—is just as important. In addition to all the other advantages the United States possesses, we must also consider its four truest allies: Canada, Mexico, the Atlantic, and the Pacific. Location matters. The fact that Soviet power happened to be situated in the heart of Eurasia was a key condition of bipolarity. Similarly, the U.S. position as an offshore power determines the nature and likely longevity of unipolarity. Just as the raw numbers could not capture the real dynamics of bipolarity, power indexes alone cannot capture the importance of the fact that the United States is in North America while all the other potential poles are in or around Eurasia. The balance of power between the sole pole and the second-tier states is not the only one that matters, and it may not even be the most important one for many states. Local balances of power may loom larger in the calculations of other states than the background unipolar structure. Efforts to produce a counterbalance globally will generate powerful countervailing action locally. As a result, the threshold concentration of power necessary to sustain unipolarity is lower than most scholars assume.

Because they fail to appreciate the sheer size and comprehensiveness of the power gap and the advantages conveyed by geography, many scholars expect bi- or multipolarity to reappear quickly. They propose three ways in which unipolarity will end: counterbalancing by other states, regional integration, or the differential growth in power. None of these is likely to generate structural change in the policy-relevant future.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Alliances are not structural***

Many scholars portray unipolarity as precarious by ignoring all the impediments to balancing in the real world. If balancing were the frictionless, costless activity assumed in some balance-of-power theories, then the unipolar power would need more than 50 percent of the capabilities in the great power system to stave off a counterpoise. Even though the United States meets this threshold today, in a hypothetical world of frictionless balancing its edge might be eroded quickly.<sup>24</sup> But such expectations miss the fact that alliance politics always impose costs, and that the impediments to balancing are especially great in the unipolar system that emerged in the wake of the Cold War.

Alliances are not structural. Because alliances are far less effective than states in producing and deploying power internationally, most scholars follow Waltz in making a distinction between the distribution of capabilities among states and the alliances states may form.<sup>25</sup> A unipolar system is one in which a counterbalance is impossible. When a counterbalance becomes possible, the system is not unipolar. The point at which this structural shift can happen is determined in part by how efficiently alliances can aggregate the power of individual states. Alliances aggregate power only to the extent that they are reliably binding and permit the merging of armed forces, defense industries, R&D infrastructures, and strategic decisionmaking. A glance at international history shows how difficult it is to coordinate counterhegemonic alliances. States are tempted to free ride, pass the buck, or

bandwagon in search of favors from the aspiring hegemon. States have to worry about being abandoned by alliance partners when the chips are down or being dragged into conflicts of others' making.<sup>26</sup> The aspiring hegemon, meanwhile, has only to make sure its domestic house is in order. In short, a single state gets more bang for the buck than several states in an alliance. To the extent that alliances are inefficient at pooling power, the sole pole obtains greater power per unit of aggregate capabilities than any alliance that might take shape against it. Right away, the odds are skewed in favor of the unipolar power.

The key, however, is that the countercoalitions of the past—on which most of our empirical knowledge of alliance politics is based—formed against centrally located land powers (France, Germany, and the Soviet Union) that constituted relatively unambiguous security threats to their neighbors. Coordinating a counterbalance against an *offshore* state that has *already* achieved unipolar status will be much more difficult.<sup>27</sup> Even a declining offshore unipolar state will have unusually wide opportunities to play divide and rule. Any second-tier state seeking to counterbalance has to contend with the existing pro-U.S. bandwagon. If things go poorly, the aspiring counterbalancer will have to confront not just the capabilities of the unipolar state, but also those of its other great power allies. All of the aspiring poles face a problem the United States does not: great power neighbors that could become crucial U.S. allies the moment an unambiguous challenge to Washington's preeminence emerges. In addition, in each region there are smaller "pivotal states" that make natural U.S. allies against an aspiring regional power.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the United States' first move in any counterbalancing game of this sort could be to try to promote such pivotal states to great power status, as it did with China against the Soviet Union in the latter days of the Cold War.

### ***New regional unipolarities: a game not worth the candle***

To bring an end to unipolarity, it is not enough for regional powers to coordinate policies in traditional alliances. They must translate their aggregate economic potential into the concrete capabilities necessary to be a pole: a defense industry and power projection capabilities that can play in the same league as those of the United States. Thus all scenarios for the rapid return of multipolarity involve regional unification or the emergence of strong regional unipolarities.<sup>29</sup> For the European, Central Eurasian, or East Asian poles to measure up to the United States in the near future, each region's resources need to fall under the *de facto* control of one state or decisionmaking authority. In the near term, either true unification in Europe and Central Eurasia (the European Union [EU] becomes a *de facto* state, or Russia recreates an empire) or unipolar dominance in each region by Germany, Russia, and China or Japan, respectively, is a necessary condition of bi- or multipolarity.

The problem with these scenarios is that regional balancing dynamics are likely to kick in against the local great power much more reliably than the global counterbalance works against the United States. Given the neighborhoods they live in, an aspiring Chinese, Japanese, Russian, or German pole would face more effective counterbalancing than the United States itself.

If the EU were a state, the world would be bipolar. To create a balance of power globally, Europe would have to suspend the balance of power locally. Which balance matters more to Europeans is not a question that will be resolved quickly. A world with a European pole would be one in which the French and the British had merged their conventional and nuclear capabilities and do not mind if the Germans control them. The EU may move in this direction, but in the absence of a major shock the movement will be very slow and ambiguous. Global leadership requires coherent and quick decisionmaking in response to

crises. Even on international monetary matters, Europe will lack this capability for some time.<sup>30</sup> Creating the institutional and political requisites for a single European foreign and security policy and defense industry goes to the heart of state sovereignty and thus is a much more challenging task for the much longer term.<sup>31</sup>

The reemergence of a Central Eurasian pole is more remote. There, the problem is not only that the key regional powers are primed to balance against a rising Russia but that Russia continues to decline. States do not rise as fast as Russia fell. For Russia to regain the capability for polar status is a project of a generation, if all goes well. For an Asian pole to emerge quickly, Japan and China would need to merge their capabilities. As in the case of Europe and Central Eurasia, a great deal has to happen in world politics before either Tokyo or Beijing is willing to submit to the unipolar leadership of the other.

Thus the quick routes to multipolarity are blocked. If states value their independence and security, most will prefer the current structure to a multipolarity based on regional unipolarities. Eventually, some great powers will have the capability to counter the United States alone or in traditional great power alliances that exact a smaller price in security or autonomy than unipolarity does. Even allowing for the differential growth in power to the United States' disadvantage, however, for several decades it is likely to remain more costly for second-tier states to form counterbalancing alliances than it is for the unipolar power to sustain a system of alliances that reinforces its own dominance.

### ***The diffusion of power***

In the final analysis, alliances cannot change the system's structure. Only the uneven growth of power (or, in the case of the EU, the creation of a new state) will bring the unipolar era to an end. Europe will take many decades to become a *de facto* state—if it ever does. Unless and until that happens, the fate of unipolarity depends on the relative rates of growth and innovation of the main powers.

I have established that the gap in favor of the United States is unprecedented and that the threshold level of capabilities it needs to sustain unipolarity is much less than the 50 percent that analysts often assume. Social science lacks a theory that can predict the rate of the rise and fall of great powers. It is possible that the United States will decline suddenly and dramatically while some other great power rises. If rates of growth tend to converge as economies approach U.S. levels of per capita GDP, then the speed at which other rich states can close the gap will be limited. Germany may be out of the running entirely.<sup>32</sup> Japan may take a decade to regain the relative position it occupied in 1990. After that, if all goes well, sustained higher growth could place it in polar position in another decade or two.<sup>33</sup> This leaves China as the focus of current expectations for the demise of unipolarity. The fact that the two main contenders to polar status are close Asian neighbors and face tight regional constraints further reinforces unipolarity. The threshold at which Japan or China will possess the capabilities to face the other *and* the United States is very high. Until then, they are better off in a unipolar order . . .

### **Conclusion: challenges for scholarship and strategy**

The distribution of material capabilities at the end of the twentieth century is unprecedented. However we view this venerable explanatory variable, the current concentration of power in the United States is something new in the world. Even if world politics works by the old rules—even if democracy, new forms of interdependence, and international institutions do

not matter—we should not expect a return of balance-of-power politics à la multipolarity for the simple reason that we are living in the modern world's first unipolar system. And unipolarity is not a “moment.” It is a deeply embedded material condition of world politics that has the potential to last for many decades . . .

Today's distribution of power is unprecedented, however, and power-centric theories naturally expect politics among nations to be different than in past systems. In contrast to the past, the existing distribution of capabilities generates incentives for cooperation. The absence of hegemonic rivalry, security competition, and balancing is not necessarily the result of ideational or institutional change. This is not to assert that realism provides the best explanation for the absence of security and prestige competition. Rather, the conclusion is that it offers an explanation that may compete with or complement those of other theoretical traditions. As a result, evaluating the merits of contending theories for understanding the international politics of unipolarity presents greater empirical challenges than many scholars have acknowledged.

Because the baseline expectations of all power-centric theories are novel, so are their implications for grand strategy. Scholars' main message to policymakers has been to prepare for multipolarity. Certainly, we should think about how to manage the transition to a new structure. Yet time and energy are limited. Constant preparation for the return of multipolarity means not gearing up intellectually and materially for unipolarity. Given that unipolarity is prone to peace and the probability that it will last several more decades at least, we should focus on it and get it right.

The first step is to stop calling this the “post-Cold War world.” Unipolarity is nearing its tenth birthday. Our experience with this international system matches what the statesmen and scholars of 1825, 1928, and 1955 had. The key to this system is the centrality of the United States. The nineteenth century was not a “Pax Britannica.” From 1815 to 1853, it was a Pax Britannica et Russica; from 1853 to 1871, it was not a pax of any kind; and from 1871 to 1914, it was a Pax Britannica et Germanica. Similarly, the Cold War was not a Pax Americana, but a Pax Americana et Sovietica. Now the ambiguity is gone. One power is lonely at the top. Calling the current period the true Pax Americana may offend some, but it reflects reality and focuses attention on the stakes involved in U.S. grand strategy.

Second, doing too little is a greater danger than doing too much. Critics note that the United States is far more interventionist than any previous system leader. But given the distribution of power, the U.S. impulse toward interventionism is understandable. In many cases, U.S. involvement has been demand driven, as one would expect in a system with one clear leader. Rhetoric aside, U.S. engagement seems to most other elites to be necessary for the proper functioning of the system. In each region, cobbled-together security arrangements that require an American role seem preferable to the available alternatives. The more efficiently the United States performs this role, the more durable the system. If, on the other hand, the United States fails to translate its potential into the capabilities necessary to provide order, then great power struggles for power and security will reappear sooner. Local powers will then face incentives to provide security, sparking local counterbalancing and security competition. As the world becomes more dangerous, more second-tier states will enhance their military capabilities. In time, the result could be an earlier structural shift to bi- or multipolarity and a quicker reemergence of conflict over the leadership of the international system.

Third, we should not exaggerate the costs. The clearer the underlying distribution of power is, the less likely it is that states will need to test it in arms races or crises. Because the current concentration of power in the United States is unprecedentedly clear and comprehensive, states are likely to share the expectation that counterbalancing would be a

costly and probably doomed venture. As a result, they face incentives to keep their military budgets under control until they observe fundamental changes in the capability of the United States to fulfill its role. The whole system can thus be run at comparatively low costs to both the sole pole and the other major powers. Unipolarity can be made to seem expensive and dangerous if it is equated with a global empire demanding U.S. involvement in all issues everywhere. In reality, unipolarity is a distribution of capabilities among the world's great powers. It does not solve all the world's problems. Rather, it minimizes two major problems—security and prestige competition—that confronted the great powers of the past. Maintaining unipolarity does not require limitless commitments. It involves managing the central security regimes in Europe and Asia, and maintaining the expectation on the part of other states that any geopolitical challenge to the United States is futile. As long as that is the expectation, states will likely refrain from trying, and the system can be maintained at little extra cost.

The main criticism of the Pax Americana, however, is not that Washington is too interventionist. A state cannot be blamed for responding to systemic incentives. The problem is U.S. reluctance to *pay up*. Constrained by a domestic welfare role and consumer culture that the weaker British hegemon never faced, Washington tends to shrink from accepting the financial, military, and especially the domestic political burdens of sole pole status. At the same time, it cannot escape the demand for involvement. The result is cruise missile hegemony, the search for polar status on the cheap, and a grand global broker of deals for which others pay. The United States has responded to structural incentives by assuming the role of global security manager and “indispensable nation” in all matters of importance. But too often the solutions Washington engineers are weakened by American reluctance to take any domestic political risks.

The problem is that structural pressures on the United States are weak. Powerful states may not respond to the international environment because their power makes them immune to its threat. The smaller the number of actors, the greater the potential impact of internal processes on international politics. The sole pole is strong and secure enough that paying up-front costs for system maintenance is hard to sell to a parsimonious public. As Kenneth Waltz argued, “Strong states . . . can afford not to learn.”<sup>34</sup> If that was true of the great powers in multi- or bipolar systems, it is even truer of today's unipolar power. The implication is that instead of dwelling on the dangers of overinvolvement and the need to prepare for an impending multipolarity, scholars and policymakers should do more to advertise the attractions of unipolarity.

Despite scholars' expectations, it was not the rise of Europe, Japan, and China that ended bipolarity. The monodimensional nature of the Soviet Union's power and the brittleness of its domestic institutions turned out to be the main threats to bipolar stability. Similarly, a uniting Europe or a rising Japan or China may not become the chief engines of structural change in the early twenty-first century. If the analysis here is right, then the live-for-today nature of U.S. domestic institutions may be the chief threat to unipolar stability. In short, the current world order is characterized not by a looming U.S. threat that is driving other powers toward multipolar counterbalancing, but by a material structure that presupposes and demands U.S. preponderance coupled with policies and rhetoric that deny its existence or refuse to face its modest costs.

## Notes

- 1 Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (Winter 1990/1991), pp. 23–33.



- 2 Patrick Tyler, "The Lone Superpower Plan: Ammunition for Critics," *New York Times*, March 10, 1992, p. A 12.
- 3 For the most thorough and theoretically grounded criticism of this strategy, see Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Arise," *International Security*, Vol. 17, No.4 (Spring 1993), pp. 5–51; and Layne, "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America's Future Grand Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 22, No.1 (Summer 1997), pp. 86–124.
- 4 The phrase—commonly attributed to Secretary of State Madeleine Albright—is also a favorite of President Bill Clinton's. For example, see the account of his speech announcing the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in Alison Mitchell, "Clinton Urges NATO Expansion in 1999," *New York Times*, October 23, 1996, p. A20.
- 5 Kenneth N. Waltz, "Evaluating Theories," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (December 1997), pp. 915–916; Layne, "Unipolar Illusion"; and Michael Mastanduno, "Preserving the Unipolar Moment: Realist Theories and US Grand Strategy after the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No.4 (Spring 1997), pp. 44–98. Although I differ with Waltz on the stability of unipolarity, the title of this article and much of its contents reflect intellectual debts to his work on system structure and stability. See Waltz, "The Stability of a Bipolar World," *Daedalus*, Vol. 93, No.3 (Summer 1964), pp. 881–901.
- 6 See Charles A. Kupchan, "After Pax Americana: Benign Power, Regional Integration, and the Sources of Stable Multipolarity," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No.3 (Fall 1998), pp. 40–79. Samuel P. Huntington maintained this position in Huntington, "Why International Primacy Matters," *International Security*, Vol. 17, No.4 (Spring 1993), pp. 63–83, but he has since abandoned it. A more bullish assessment, although still more pessimistic than the analysis here, is Douglas Lemke, "Continuity of History: Power Transition Theory and the End of the Cold War," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 34, No.1 (February 1996), pp. 203–236.
- 7 As Glenn H. Snyder puts it, the international system "appears to be unipolar, though incipiently multipolar." Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 18. The quoted phrases in this sentence appear in Charles A. Kupchan, "Rethinking Europe," *National Interest*, No. 56 (Summer 1999); Kupchan, "After Pax Americana," p. 41; Layne, "Unipolar Illusion"; Mastanduno, "Preserving the Unipolar Moment"; and Waltz, "Evaluating Theories," p. 914. Although Charles Krauthammer coined the term "unipolar moment" in his article under that title, he argued that unipolarity had the potential to last a generation.
- 8 Samuel P. Huntington, "The Lonely Superpower," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 78, No.2 (March/April 1999), p. 36. For similar views of the post-Cold War structure, see Aaron L. Friedberg, "Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia," *International Security*, Vol. 18, No.3 (Winter 1993/94), pp. 5–33; and Josef Joffe, "'Bismarck' or 'Britain'? Toward an American Grand Strategy after Bipolarity," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No.4 (Spring 1995), pp. 94–117.
- 9 The assumption that realism predicts instability after the Cold War pervades the scholarly debate. See, for example, Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller, eds., *The Cold War and After: Prospects for Peace—An International Security Reader* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993); and David A. Baldwin, ed., *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). For more varied perspectives on realism and unipolarity, see Ethan B. Kapstein and Michael Mastanduno, eds., *Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies after the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). Explanations for stability despite the balance of power fall roughly into three categories: (1) liberal arguments, including democratization, economic interdependence, and international institutions. For examples, see Bruce M. Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993); John R. Oneal and Bruce M. Russett, "The Classical Liberals Were Right: Democracy, Interdependence, and Conflict, 1950–1985," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No.2 (June 1997), pp. 267–294; G. John Ikenberry, "Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Persistence of the American Postwar Order," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Winter 1998/99), pp. 43–78. (2) Cultural and ideational arguments that highlight social learning. See John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1989); and Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), chap. 6. (3) Arguments that highlight systemic and material factors other than the balance of power, such as globalization, the offense–defense balance, or nuclear weapons. See Stephen G. Brooks, "The Globalization of Production and the Changing



- Benefits of Conquest," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 43, No.5 (October 1999); and Stephen Van Evera, "Primed for Peace: Europe after the Cold War," in Jones and Miller, *Cold War and After*.
- 10 I focus on material elements of power mainly because current scholarly debates place a premium on making clear distinctions between ideas and material forces. See Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*; and Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Fall 1999). Many nonmaterial elements of power also favor the United States and strengthen the argument for unipolarity's stability. On "soft power," see Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).
  - 11 I define "stability" as peacefulness and durability. Kenneth Waltz first conflated these two meanings of stability in "The Stability of a Bipolar World." He later eliminated the ambiguity by defining stability exclusively as durability in *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979). I avoid ambiguity by treating peacefulness and durability separately. Durability subsumes another common understanding of stability: the idea of a self-reinforcing equilibrium. To say that an international system is durable implies that it can experience significant shifts in power relations without undergoing fundamental change. See Robert Jervis, *Systems Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), chap. 3.
  - 12 Because overwhelming preponderance favors both peace and durability, stability is less sensitive to how the United States defines its interests than most scholars assume. In contrast, many realists hold that stability is strictly contingent upon Washington's nonthreatening or status quo stance in world affairs. See Mastanduno, "Preserving the Unipolar Moment." Similarly, Kupchan, "After Pax Americana," argues that the United States' "benign" character explains stability.
  - 13 This was Krauthammer's original argument in "The Unipolar Moment." For a comprehensive review of the debate that reflects the standard scholarly skepticism toward the stability of unipolarity, see Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No.2 (Winter 1996/97), pp. 5–54.
  - 14 This definition flows from the logic of neorealist balance-of-power theory, but it is consistent with classical balance-of-power thinking. See Layne, "Unipolar Illusion," p. 130 n. 2; Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, chap. 1; Morton Kaplan, *System and Process in International Politics* (New York: Wiley, 1957), pp. 22–36; Harrison Wagner, "What Was Bipolarity?" *International Organization*, Vol. 47, No.1 (Winter 1993), pp. 77–106; and Emerson M.S. Niou, Peter C Ordeshook, and Gregory F. Rose, *The Balance of Power: Stability in International Systems* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 76.
  - 15 Germany was clearly the strongest state in Europe in 1910, and the United States was generally thought to be the strongest state in the world in 1960, but neither system was unipolar. One of Waltz's most widely accepted insights was that the world was bipolar in the Cold War even though the two poles shared it with other major powers such as France, Britain, West Germany, Japan, and China. In the same vein, a system can be unipolar, with unique properties owing to the extreme concentration of capabilities in one state, and yet also contain other substantial powers. Cf. Huntington, "Lonely Superpower," who defines unipolarity as a system with only one great power. Throughout this article, I hew as closely as possible to the definitions of central terms in Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, as they have gained the widest currency. Although the distinction between bipolarity and multipolarity is one of the most basic in international relations theory, scholars do debate whether bipolar structures are more durable or peaceful than multipolar ones. For a concise discussion, see Jack S. Levy, "The Causes of War and the Conditions of Peace," *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 1 (1998), pp. 139–165. There are good reasons for analyzing tripolarity as a distinct structure. See Randall L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).
  - 16 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 131.
  - 17 For simplicity, I treat only Waltz's neorealist version of balance-of-power theory. By "hegemonic theory," I mean the theory of hegemonic war and change in Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, as well as power transition theory, which is sometimes applied to pairs of states other than hegemon and challenger. In addition to A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics*, 2d ed. (New York: Knopf, 1965), and A.F.K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), see Jacek Kugler and Douglas Lemke, eds., *Parity and War: Evaluation and Extension of the War Ledger* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); and the chapters by George

- Modelski and William R. Thompson, Manus I. Midlarsky, and Jacek Kugler and A.F.K. Organski in Midlarsky, ed., *Handbook of War Studies* (London: Unwin, 1989). Theories of the balance of power and hegemony are often thought to be competing. I maintained this position in *Elusive Balance*, chap. 1. In many instances, however, they are complementary. See Randall L. Schweller and William C. Wohlforth, "Power Test: Updating Realism in Response to the End of the Cold War," *Security Studies* (forthcoming). For an interesting synthesis with some points of contact with the analysis here, see William R. Thompson, "Dehio, Long Cycles, and the Geohistorical Context of Structural Transition," *World Politics*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (October 1992), pp. 127–152; and Karen A. Rasler and William R. Thompson, *Great Powers and Global Struggle, 1490–1990* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994).
- 18 Exceptions include Douglas Lemke, "Continuity of History: Power Transition Theory and the End of the Cold War," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (February 1996), pp. 203–236; and Mark S. Sheetz, "Correspondence: Debating the Unipolar Moment," *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Winter 1997/1998), pp. 168–174.
  - 19 Waltz, "Evaluating Theories," p. 915.
  - 20 The connection between uncertainty, the number of principal players, and war proneness has been questioned. The key to most recent criticisms of neorealist arguments concerning stability is that the distribution of capabilities alone is insufficient to explain the war proneness of international systems. Ancillary assumptions concerning risk attitudes or preferences for the status quo are necessary. See Levy, "The Causes of War"; Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, "Neorealism's Logic and Evidence: When Is a Theory Falsified?" paper prepared for the Fiftieth Annual Conference of the International Studies Association, Washington, D.C., February 1999; and Robert Powell, "Stability and the Distribution of Power," *World Politics*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (January 1996), pp. 239–267, and sources cited therein. These analyses are right that no distribution of power rules out war if some states are great risk takers or have extreme clashes of interest. The greater the preponderance of power, however, the more extreme the values of other variables must be to produce war, because preponderance reduces the uncertainty of assessing the balance of power.
  - 21 The sole pole's power advantages matter only to the degree that it is engaged, and it is most likely to be engaged in politics among the other major powers. The argument applies with less force to potential security competition between regional powers, or between a second-tier state and a lesser power with which the system leader lacks close ties.
  - 22 Three may be worse than four, however. See Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, chap. 9; and Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances*.
  - 23 Here I depart from Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 161–162, for whom a stable system is one with no "consequential variation" in the number of poles (e.g., changes between multi-, tri-, bi-, or unipolarity). In the European states system, multipolarity obtained for three centuries. While the multipolar structure itself was long lived, however, the identity of its members (the leading states in the system) changed with much greater frequency—a matter of no small consequence for the governments concerned. By this measure (change in the identity, as opposed to the number, of the states that define the structure), bipolarity had a typical life span. See Bueno de Mesquita, "Neorealism's Logic and Evidence." I expect that the unipolar era will be of comparable duration.
  - 24 I do not deny the utility of making simplifying assumptions when speculating about the balance of power. For one such analysis, see Michael W. Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace: Realism, Liberalism, and Socialism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), pp. 456–473.
  - 25 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; and Snyder, *Alliance Politics*.
  - 26 See Snyder, *Alliance Politics*; and Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity," *International Organization*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Winter 1990), pp. 137–168.
  - 27 The key here is that from the standpoint of balance-of-power theory, we are dealing with a structural fait accompli. Of the two powers that made up the bipolar order, one collapsed, leaving the other at the center of a unipolar system. A situation has arisen in which the theory's central tendency cannot operate. Many readers will perceive this state of affairs as a testimony to the weakness of balance-of-power theory. I agree. The weaker the theory, the longer our initial expectations of unipolarity's longevity.
  - 28 On "pivotal states," see Robert Chase, Emily Hill, and Paul Kennedy, *The Pivotal States: A New Framework for U.S. Policy in the Developing World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).
  - 29 Kupchan, "Pax Americana," advocates just such a system.

- 30 See Kathleen R. McNamara, "European Monetary Union and International Economic Cooperation," a report on a workshop organized by the International Finance Section, Princeton University, April 3, 1998. Cf. Kupchan, "Rethinking Europe," who contends: "Assuming the European Union succeeds in deepening its level of integration and adding new members, it will soon have influence on matters of finance and trade equal to America's. A more balanced strategic relationship is likely to follow." Many Europeans see a contradiction between widening and deepening the EU.
- 31 This is why many Americans support an EU "security identity." If all goes well, Europe will become a more useful and outward-looking partner while posing virtually no chance of becoming a geopolitical competitor. See, for example, Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Strategy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), chap. 3.
- 32 See Max Otte, *A Rising Middle Power? German Foreign Policy in Transformation, 1988–1998* (New York: St. Martin's, forthcoming), chap. 3.
- 33 Assessments of Japan's future growth in the late 1990s are probably as overly pessimistic as those of the 1980s were overly optimistic. According to Peter Hartcher, "Can Japan Recover?" *National Interest*, No. 54 (Winter 1998/1999), p. 33, "Japan's Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) estimates that even if the country manages to emerge from recession, its maximum potential growth rate until the year 2010 is a pathetic 1.8 percent, and a miserable 0.8 percent thereafter. And that is one of the more optimistic estimates." If, in contrast to these assumptions, the Japanese economy recovers in 2000 and grows at a robust annual average rate of 5 percent, while the U.S. economy grows at 2 percent, Japan's economy would surpass the United States' around 2025 (2033 using PPP estimates of the size of the two economies in 1997).
- 34 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 195.

# The unipolar illusion revisited

## The coming end of the United States' unipolar moment

*Christopher Layne*

From: *International Security* 31, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 7–41.

The key grand strategic issue confronting U.S. policymakers today is whether the United States can escape the same fate that has befallen the other great powers that have contended for hegemony since the origin of the modern international state system (circa 1500). Since the early 1990s, U.S. policymakers have embraced primacy and adopted an ambitious grand strategy of expanding the United States' preponderant power—notwithstanding the seemingly ironclad rule of modern international history that hegemons always provoke, and are defeated by, the counterhegemonic balancing of other great powers. U.S. primacy also has widespread support in the scholarly community. Primacist scholars claim that U.S. hard-power capabilities are so overwhelming that other states cannot realistically hope to balance against the United States, nor do they have reason to because U.S. hegemony is benevolent.<sup>1</sup> Like their policymaking counterparts, they believe that hegemony advances U.S. interests and that the United States can maintain its preeminence deep into the century.

The United States' hegemonic grand strategy has been challenged by Waltzian balance of power realists who believe that the days of U.S. primacy are numbered and that other states have good reason to fear unbalanced U.S. power.<sup>2</sup> More recently, other scholars have argued that, albeit in nontraditional forms, counterbalancing against the United States already is occurring. While many of these scholars favor primacy, they acknowledge that unless the United States wields its preponderant power with restraint, it could fall victim to a counterhegemonic backlash . . .

In this article I address three fundamental questions. First, is the United States insulated from challenge because of its alleged status as a nonthreatening, or benevolent, hegemon? Second, since the Cold War's end, have other states balanced against the United States? The answers to these two questions hold the key to answering a third: How long is U.S. hegemony likely to last? My central arguments are threefold. First, there are strong reasons to doubt the claim that other states view U.S. primacy as nonthreatening. Second, unipolarity has not altered the fundamental dynamics of international politics: other states always have compelling incentives to offset the preponderant capabilities of the very powerful, even if the hegemon does not pose an existential threat to them. Third, because the United States' expansionist grand strategy reinforces other states' perceptions that U.S. unipolar power is threatening, the United States must adopt a different grand strategy: an offshore balancing strategy of self-restraint . . .

### **Why balance of power realists were wrong about unipolarity**

The core proposition of Waltzian balance of power realists (and defensive realists) is that bids for hegemony fail because they are opposed by the counterbalancing efforts of other states.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, realists predicted that following the Cold War's end, hard balancing against the United States would quickly cause the international system's distribution of power to revert to multipolarity. Three reasons largely explain why the Waltzians were wrong. First, they failed to appreciate fully the "duality of American power" in a unipolar world; that is, they did not recognize that second-tier major powers would face pressures both to align with the U.S. hegemon and to balance against it.<sup>4</sup> Second, they did not foresee that virtually all of the possible counterbalancers—Russia, China, Germany, and Japan—had internal problems that constrained their ability to balance against the United States. Simply stated, the Waltzians underestimated the geopolitical consequence of the Soviet Union's sudden demise: there were no other states with the capabilities to step into the post-Cold War geopolitical vacuum and act as counterweights to the United States.<sup>5</sup> Third, they did not understand that balancing against an extant hegemon would be more difficult than countering a rising one . . .<sup>6</sup>

### ***The case for U.S. hegemonic exceptionalism***

Is hegemony likely to be a winning grand strategy for the United States? Or will "imperial overstretch" be its undoing?<sup>7</sup>

Since the Cold War's end, many international relations theorists and strategic analysts have argued that the United States will not fall victim to the fate of past hegemonies. They advance two distinct lines of argumentation to support this claim of U.S. hegemonic exceptionalism. The first is strategic: other states cannot balance against the United States because of its formidable military and economic capabilities, nor do they need to do so because U.S. military power does not threaten them. The second line of argumentation is based on the notion that the United States is a benevolent hegemon. This purported benevolence is the product of several factors, including the benefits that other states derive from U.S. hegemony and the trust in U.S. intentions that is instilled in other states because the United States is a liberal democracy . . .

### **U.S. hegemonic exceptionalism—a critique**

For the United States, a great deal rides on two questions: Is U.S. hegemony different from that of past great powers, and will the United States succeed where others have failed? In this section, I demonstrate that the arguments in favor of U.S. hegemonic exceptionalism are weak: the United States is not exempt from the fate of past hegemonies . . .

Precisely because unipolarity means that other states must worry primarily about the hegemon's capabilities rather than its intentions, the ability of the United States to reassure others is limited by its formidable—and unchecked—capabilities, which always are at least a latent threat to other states.<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that the United States is powerless to shape others' perceptions of whether it is a threat. But doing so is difficult because in a unipolar world, the burden of proof is on the hegemon to demonstrate to others that its power is not threatening.<sup>9</sup>

Even in a unipolar world, not all of the other major powers will believe themselves to be threatened (or to be equally threatened) by the hegemon. Eventually, however, some are

bound to regard the hegemon's power as menacing. For example, although primacists assert that U.S. hegemony is nonthreatening because U.S. power is "offshore," this manifestly is not the case. On the contrary, in Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East, American power is both onshore (or lurking just over the horizon in the case of East Asia) and in the faces of Russia, China, and the Islamic world. Far from being an offshore balancer that is "stopped by water" from dominating regions beyond the Western Hemisphere, the United States has acquired the means to project massive military power into, and around, Eurasia, and thereby to establish extraregional hegemony in Europe, East Asia, and the Persian Gulf.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Regional balancing and U.S. hegemony***

Another argument that scholars frequently invoke to support the claim that U.S. hegemony will not be challenged is that the major Eurasian powers will be too busy competing against each other to worry about the United States, and will want to enlist it as an ally against their regional rivals. Although superficially plausible, this argument overlooks two key points. First, the history of the modern international state system until 1945 demonstrates that when faced with a bid for hegemony, rival great powers put their own enmities on the backburner and formed temporary alliances to defeat it. For example, during the Napoleonic Wars, England made common cause with Russia (with which it competed for influence in the Baltic and the Near East, and on India's Northwest Frontier) to defeat France. At the turn of the twentieth century, England set aside its rivalries with France and Russia and joined with them in containing Wilhelmine Germany. Similarly, following the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, London entered into an alliance with Moscow. Explaining Britain's willingness to ally with the Soviet Union—theretofore regarded by British policymakers as threatening geopolitically and ideologically—Prime Minister Winston Churchill said, "If Hitler invaded Hell, I should at least make a favorable reference to the Devil in the House of Commons."

Second, although regional balancing could work to the United States' advantage, it would be more likely to do so in a future multipolar system rather than in a unipolar one. The Cold War illustrates this point. During the Cold War, the United States was hegemonic in the non-Soviet world. Although deeply ambivalent (or worse) about U.S. hegemony, the West Europeans nonetheless accepted—reluctantly—U.S. primacy because the United States protected them from the Soviet threat.<sup>11</sup> In the absence of a hostile countervailing pole (or poles) of power in today's unipolar world, however, there is a higher risk that others—even erstwhile U.S. allies—will come to see U.S. hegemony as a greater threat than U.S. preponderance during the Cold War.

The likelihood that the major Eurasian powers may engage in regional balancing, in fact, is a more powerful argument for an offshore balancing strategy than it is for a hegemonic one: as an offshore balancer in a multipolar world, the United States could safely retract its military power from Eurasia because the regional powers would focus their strategic attention primarily on the security threats posed by their neighbors rather than on the United States.<sup>12</sup> The United States could enhance its relative power position simply by standing on the sidelines while security competitions sapped the relative power positions of the major Eurasian powers.

### ***Multilateralism and U.S. hegemony***

The argument that U.S. hegemony can be long-lasting if the United States acts multilaterally is doubtful. Its proponents assert that by acting multilaterally, the United States can establish



its credentials as a benevolent hegemon and insulate itself from counterbalancing. The very hallmarks of international politics, however—anarchy, self-help, and competition—mean that, in the realm of security, unilateral strategies are always the default option of great powers. As John Mearsheimer writes, “States operating in a self-help world almost always act according to their own self-interest and do not subordinate their interests to the interests of other states, or to the interests of the so-called international community. The reason is simple: it pays to be selfish in a self-help world.”<sup>13</sup> Smart policymakers in other states know this and understand the implications with respect to U.S. behavior.

Prophylactic multilateralism cannot inoculate the United States from counterhegemonic balancing. The reality of the United States’ enormous power cannot be hidden by the veil of multilateralism. Moreover, what the feisty Brooklyn Dodgers’ manager Leo Duroucher said about baseball is also true in international politics: nice guys finish last. The United States did not attain hegemony by being nice, but rather by assertively—and, occasionally, aggressively—using its power. Although the United States may profess its regard for others’ interests and its commitment to multilateralism, it can use its power unilaterally to others’ detriment whenever it chooses.<sup>14</sup> If other states did not understand this before (though many of them did), the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq dispelled any illusion. For much of the world, the invasion shattered one of the most important foundations upon which the notion of benevolent U.S. hegemony is based: the perception that the United States is a status quo power. Since the Cold War’s end, notes Walt, “The United States has not acted as a ‘status quo’ power: rather, it has used its position of primacy to increase its influence, to enhance its position vis-à-vis potential rivals, and to deal with specific security threats . . .”<sup>15</sup>

### ***The United States as a democratic hegemon***

Many primacists believe that the United States can be a successful, benevolent hegemon because it is a liberal democracy. This argument rests on wobbly reasoning. Certainly, there is a considerable literature purporting to show that the quality of international politics among democracies differs from that between democracies and nondemocracies; that is, democracies cooperate with each other, constitute a “pluralistic security community,” accord each other respect, and conduct their affairs based on shared values and norms (transparency, give-and-take, live and let live, compromise, and peaceful dispute resolution). These ideas comport with the Wilsonian ideology that drives U.S. grand strategic behavior, but there is powerful evidence demonstrating that democracies do not behave better toward each other than toward nondemocracies.

The mere fact that the United States is a democracy does not negate the possibility that other states will fear its hegemonic power. First, theories that posit a special democratic (or liberal) peace are contradicted by the historical record. When important geopolitical interests are at stake, realpolitik—not regime type—determines great power policies.<sup>16</sup> Contrary to liberal theory, democracies (and liberal states) have threatened to use military force against each other to resolve diplomatic crises and have even gone to the brink of war. Indeed, democracies have not just teetered on the brink; they have gone over it. The most notable example of a war among democracies occurred in 1914 when democratic Britain and France went to war against democratic Germany.<sup>17</sup> Today, the gross imbalance of U.S. power means that whenever the United States believes its interests are threatened, it will act like other hegemons typically have acted, notwithstanding that it is a democracy.<sup>18</sup>

Second, the term “democracy” itself is subjective; democracy has many different—contested—meanings.<sup>19</sup> To say that two states are democracies may conceal more than it

reveals. Take the U.S. relationship with Europe, for example. Although liberal international relations theory stresses that democracies are linked by shared norms and values, in recent years—and especially since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001—polling data suggest that the United States and Europe share few common values. A September 2004 survey of 8,000 respondents on both sides of the Atlantic, cosponsored by the German Marshall Fund and the Compagnia di Sao Paolo of Turin, Italy, found that 83 percent of Americans and 79 percent of Europeans concurred that the United States and Europe have different social and cultural values.<sup>20</sup> On a host of important domestic and international issues, including attitudes toward the role of international law and institutions, Americans and Europeans hold divergent views. Although this split may be less pronounced among transatlantic elite opinion than it is among mass opinion, if, over time, the gulf continues at the public level, it will eventually influence foreign policy behavior on both sides of the Atlantic.

In international politics there are no benevolent hegemons. In today's world, other states dread both the overconcentration of geopolitical influence in the United States' favor and the purposes for which it may be used. As Paul Sharp writes, "No great power has a monopoly on virtue and, although some may have a great deal more virtue than others, virtue imposed on others is not seen as such by them. All great powers are capable of exercising a measure of selfrestraint, but they are tempted not to and the choice to practice restraint is made easier by the existence of countervailing power and the possibility of it being exercised."<sup>21</sup> While Washington's self-proclaimed benevolence is inherently ephemeral, the hard fist of U.S. power is tangible . . .

### **Conclusion: the waning of U.S. hegemony**

Since the Cold War's end, most U.S. grand strategists have believed that American hegemony is exceptional, and therefore that the United States need not worry about other states engaging in counterhegemonic balancing against it. They advance two reasons for this assessment. First, drawing on balance of threat and hegemonic stability theories, some scholars argue that other states regard the United States as a benevolent, or nonthreatening, hegemon. Second, some scholars claim that strategically the United States is immune from counterhegemonic balancing because overwhelming U.S. military and economic power makes it impossible for others to balance against the United States. The case for U.S. hegemonic exceptionalism, however, is weak.

To be sure, contrary to the predictions of Waltzian balance of power theorists, unipolarity persists. No new great powers have emerged to restore equilibrium to the balance of power by engaging in hard balancing against the United States—at least, not yet. This has led primacists to conclude that there has been no balancing against the United States. However, the primacists' focus on both the failure of new great powers to emerge and the absence of hard balancing distracts attention from other forms of behavior—notably leashslipping—by major second-tier states that ultimately could lead to the end of unipolarity. Unipolarity is the foundation of U.S. hegemony and, if it ends, so will U.S. primacy.

U.S. hegemony cannot endure indefinitely. Even the strongest proponents of primacy harbor an unspoken fear that U.S. hegemony will provoke the very kind of geopolitical backlash that they say cannot happen (or at least cannot happen for a very long time).<sup>22</sup> In fact, although a new geopolitical balance has yet to emerge, there is considerable evidence that other states have been engaging in balancing against the United States—including hard balancing. U.S. concerns about China's great power emergence reflect

Washington's fears about the military, as well as economic, implications of China's rise. Other evidence suggests—at least by some measures—that the international system is closer to a multipolar distribution of power than primacists realize. In its survey of likely international developments through 2020, the National Intelligence Council's report *Mapping the Global Future* notes: "The likely emergence of China and India as new major global players—similar to the rise of Germany in the 19th century and the United States in the early 20th century—will transform the geopolitical landscape, with impacts potentially as dramatic as those of the previous two centuries. In the same way that commentators refer to the 1900s as the American Century, the early 21st century may be seen as the time when some in the developing world led by China and India came into their own."<sup>23</sup> In a similar vein, a recent study by the Strategic Assessment Group projects that by 2020 both China (which *Mapping the Global Future* argues will then be "by any measure a first-rate military power") and the European Union could each have nearly as much power as the United States.<sup>24</sup> Projecting current trends several decades into the future has its pitfalls (not least because of the difficulty of converting economic power into effective military power). But if this ongoing shift in the distribution of relative power continues, new poles of power in the international system are likely to emerge in the next decade or two.

The future of U.S. hegemony centers on the questions of timing and costs. How long can the United States maintain its unipolar position? Do the benefits of perpetuating unipolarity outweigh the costs? In 1993 I suggested that by 2010, unipolarity would give way to multipolarity.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, in 1999 William Wohlforth stated "that if Washington plays its cards right, [U.S. hegemony] may last as long as bipolarity."<sup>26</sup> The post-World War II bipolar era lasted forty-five years. So by Wohlforth's calculations, U.S. preponderance could last until around 2030. The difference in these two predictions was, at most, only about twenty years . . .

The United States enjoys no privileged exemption from the fate of past hegemonies. American primacists conflate balancing (a grand strategy pursued by individual states) with the attainment of balance in the international system (a more or less equal distribution of power among the great powers). That others' balancing efforts have not yet produced a balance of power does not mean they are not trying to offset U.S. hegemony, although these balancing efforts will require time to bear fruit. Thus, contrary to my 1993 prediction, the United States probably will not be challenged by great power rivals as early as 2010. Yet, it also is doubtful that U.S. hegemony will endure until 2030, as Wohlforth predicted in 1999. The key question facing American strategists, therefore, is: Should the United States cling to unipolarity for, at best, another two decades? Or should it abandon its hegemonic grand strategy for a less ambitious one of offshore balancing?

There are two versions of offshore balancing from which the United States can choose: multilateral or unilateral.<sup>27</sup> As a multilateral offshore balancer, the United States would act both to "reassure its allies that it will use force with wisdom and restraint" and to "reduce the fear created by its superior power by giving other states a voice in the circumstances in which it will use force."<sup>28</sup> Multilateral offshore balancing is problematic for four reasons. First, it is internally inconsistent, because its twin goals of preserving U.S. primacy while persuading others that they need not fear U.S. power do not mesh.<sup>29</sup> Second, the idea that the United States should exercise its power in concert with others runs counter to the fundamental realities of international politics.<sup>30</sup> Third, even if the United States could reassure its allies that it will use its power wisely, its ability to reassure potential adversaries such as China and Russia remains doubtful. Finally, multilateral offshore balancing can fairly be viewed as a backdoor strategy for preserving U.S. hegemony, rather than as a policy of restraint.<sup>31</sup>

At bottom, multilateral offshore balancing does not address the United States' "hegemony problem," which is not caused by U.S. unilateralism. The real problem is that too often the United States acts unwisely (or, as in the case of Iraq, foolishly)—something it just as easily can do multilaterally as unilaterally. Although some analysts blame the George W. Bush administration for the United States' hegemony problem, the facts suggest otherwise. Concerns about unchecked U.S. power in a unipolar world first were voiced almost simultaneously with the Soviet Union's collapse. And it was during the Clinton administration that U.S. officials first acknowledged in so many words that America had a hegemony problem.

The United States has a hegemony problem because it wields hegemonic power. To reduce the fear of U.S. power, the United States must accept some reduction in its relative hard power by adopting a multipolar—and essentially unilateral—offshore balancing strategy that accommodates the rise of new great powers.<sup>32</sup> It also must rein in the scope of its extravagant ambitions to shape the international system in accordance with its Wilsonian ideology. The United States does not need to be an extraregional hegemon to be secure. Its quest for hegemony is driven instead by an ideational, deterritorialized conception of security divorced from the traditional metrics of great power grand strategy: the distribution of power in the international system and geography.<sup>33</sup> Thus, to reduce others' concerns about its power, the United States must practice *self-restraint* (which is different from choosing to be constrained by others by adopting a multilateral approach to grand strategy). An America that has the wisdom and prudence to contain itself is less likely to be feared than one that begs the rest of the world to stop it before it expands hegemonically again.

If the United States fails to adopt an offshore balancing strategy based on multipolarity and military and ideological self-restraint, it probably will, at some point, have to fight to uphold its primacy, which is a potentially dangerous strategy. Maintaining U.S. hegemony is a game that no longer is worth the candle, especially given that U.S. primacy may already be in the early stages of erosion. Paradoxically, attempting to sustain U.S. primacy may well hasten its end by stimulating more intensive efforts to balance against the United States, thus causing the United States to become imperially overstretched and involving it in unnecessary wars that will reduce its power. Rather than risking these outcomes, the United States should begin to retrench strategically and capitalize on the advantages accruing to insular great powers in multipolar systems. Unilateral offshore balancing, indeed, is America's next grand strategy.

## Notes

- 1 For arguments that the United States can be a successful hegemon, see Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), especially chaps. 1, 5; Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990); Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004); Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005); and William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Summer 1999), pp. 5–41. See also Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "American Primacy in Perspective," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, No. 4 (July/August 2002), pp. 20–33; Michael Mastanduno, "Preserving the Unipolar Moment: Realist Theories and U.S. Grand Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Spring 1997), pp. 49–88; and G. John Ikenberry, "Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Persistence of Postwar Order," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Winter 1998/99), pp. 43–78.

- 2 Following the Soviet Union's demise, Kenneth N. Waltz and I predicted that unipolarity would quickly give way to multipolarity by stimulating the rise of new great powers. See Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise," *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Spring 1993), pp. 5–51; and Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Fall 1994), pp. 44–79. Obviously, these predictions were wrong. I still believe, however, that the analytical case made to support the prediction that unipolarity would cause new great powers to emerge as counterweights was correct. Indeed, with China's rise we gradually may be seeing the fulfillment of that prediction. For extended discussion, see Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006).
- 3 As Barry R. Posen states, not only does balance of power theory suggest that "expanding hegemony will be opposed and stopped," but there is "ample historical evidence that this is the case." Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 68–69.
- 4 The phrase "duality of American power" is borrowed from Michel Fortmann, T.V. Paul, and James J. Wirtz, "Conclusions," in T.V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann, eds, *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the Twenty-first Century* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 366.
- 5 Kenneth N. Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Summer 2000), p. 30.
- 6 Balance of power theory is good at predicting that power balances eventually will form whenever too much power is concentrated in the hands of a single great power, but it cannot predict how long it will take for this to happen. *Ibid.*
- 7 Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987).
- 8 Walt concedes that the very fact of U.S. hard power creates difficulty for the United States in persuading others that it is not a threat to them. The United States "may" convince others that it is not a threat if it "acts wisely." Walt, *Taming American Power*, p. 61. On the other hand, it may not succeed in altering their perceptions of a U.S. threat no matter how much wisdom informs its diplomacy.
- 9 I am grateful to Michael Desch for suggesting this point to me.
- 10 For extended discussion, see Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*.
- 11 Immediately after World War II, West European elites were more concerned with domestic balances of power (keeping the communist parties out of power) than with the external balance of power. Hence, instead of being driven by the need to balance against the Soviet Union, their foreign policies were driven primarily by the need to bandwagon with the United States, which allowed them to receive U.S. economic aid that helped consolidate their political positions.
- 12 Walt makes a similar point: "As the world's most powerful country, the United States will inevitably face greater suspicion and resentment than it did when it was one of several Great Powers (as it was from 1900 to 1945), or even when it was one of two superpowers (as it was from 1945 to 1989)." Walt, *Taming American Power*, pp. 60–61.
- 13 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), p. 33.
- 14 Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," p. 28. As Robert Jervis notes, a hegemon's capabilities are more important to other states than its intentions because "minds can be changed, new leaders can come to power, values can shift, new opportunities and dangers can arise." Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (January 1978), p. 105.
- 15 Walt, *Taming American Power*, p. 23. For another important argument that from 1945 until 2001 U.S. administrations pursued—often unilaterally—a non-status quo grand strategy, see Stephen Sestanovich, "American Maximalism," *National Interest*, No. 79 (Spring 2005), pp. 13–23.
- 16 See Christopher Layne, "Kant or Cant: The Myth of the Democratic Peace," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Fall 1994), pp. 5–49.
- 17 For the argument that World War I in the West was a war among democracies, see Christopher Layne, "Shell Games, Shallow Gains, and the Democratic Peace," *International History Review*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (December 2001), pp. 799–813. For a supporting argument, see Ido Oren, "The Subjectivity of the 'Democratic' Peace: Changing U.S. Perceptions of Imperial Germany," *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Fall 1995), pp. 147–185.



- 18 Of course, the fact that the United States purportedly is a democratic hegemon does nothing to cause nondemocratic states (either second-tier major powers or lesser-ranking regional powers) to regard U.S. primacy as benevolent. On the contrary, because the United States seeks to export its domestic institutions and values abroad—often by seeking regime change—and categorizes other states as “threats” because of their domestic political systems and ideologies, it is perceived by such states as a threat. Given that states and regimes want to survive, it is unsurprising that states perceiving a U.S. threat to their interests and to regime survival seek to defend themselves—often by adopting asymmetric strategies, including acquiring weapons of mass destruction and supporting terrorism.
- 19 David Collier and Stephen Levitsky, “Research Note: Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research,” *World Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (April 1997), pp. 430–451. See also Oren, “The Subjectivity of the ‘Democratic’ Peace.”
- 20 Glen Frankel, “Opposition to U.S. Policy Grows in Europe,” *Washington Post*, September 4, 2004. See also Craig Kennedy and Marshall M. Bouton, “The Real Trans-Atlantic Gap,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 133 (November/December 2002), pp. 64–74; Daniel M. Nelson, “Transatlantic Transmutations,” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Autumn 2002), pp. 51–66; and “American Values: Living with a Superpower,” *Economist*, January 4, 2002, pp. 18–20. I am grateful to Gabriela Marin Thornton for calling my attention to both the *Washington Post* story and the Nelson article. A recent Harris survey found that Europeans see the United States as a greater threat to international stability than either China or Iran. John Thornhill, David Dombey, and Edward Allen, “Europeans See U.S. as Greater Threat to Stability than Iran,” *Financial Times* (London), June 19, 2006.
- 21 Paul Sharp, “Virtue Unrestrained: Herbert Butterfield and the Problem of American Power,” *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (August 2004), pp. 300–315.
- 22 Although he is the foremost advocate of the view that the United States is too powerful to be balanced against, William Wohlforth (with Stephen Brooks) argues that the United States “needs to act with magnanimity in the face of temptation” to reassure the rest of the world that U.S. primacy is nonthreatening. That is, he seems to be saying that others can and will balance against the United States if they fear U.S. power. Brooks and Wohlforth, “American Primacy in Perspective,” p. 33.
- 23 National Intelligence Council, *Mapping the Global Future: Report of the National Intelligence Council’s 2020 Project* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, December 2004), p. 47.
- 24 The Strategic Assessment Group’s analysis of current and projected world-power shares was based on the international futures model developed by Barry Hughes. For a discussion of the methodology and a summary of the group’s findings, see Gregory F. Treverton and Seth G. Jones, *Measuring National Power* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2005), pp. iii, ix–x.
- 25 Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion,” p. 7.
- 26 Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” p. 8.
- 27 On offshore balancing, see Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*; Christopher Layne, “From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing,” *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Summer 1997), pp. 86–124; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*; and Walt, *Taming American Power*. Mearsheimer contends that the United States already is an offshore balancer. I concur that the United States should be an offshore balancer, but demonstrate that its policy since the early 1940s has been a grand strategy of extraregional hegemony, not offshore balancing.
- 28 Walt, *Taming American Power*, p. 226.
- 29 Walt argues that the United States should not relinquish “the advantages that primacy now provides” and that “the central aim of U.S. grand strategy should be to preserve its current position for as long as possible.” *Ibid.*, p. 219.
- 30 In the realm of security, states—even the United States and its allies—tend to have conflicting, rather than convergent, interests. When the members of international institutions disagree with U.S. policies, they will not act to legitimize them, which means that the United States would be left with the choice of abandoning policies it deems important (or even vital) or allowing its interests to be defined by others.
- 31 Many adherents of defensive realism and of balance of threat theory actually are closet Wilsonian liberal internationalists. Stephen Van Evera is an example of the former, and Walt is an example of the latter. In *Taming American Power*, Walt asserts that U.S. liberal ideology is a key component



of U.S. influence (p. 219). He also says that, as an offshore balancer, “the United States would still be actively engaged around the world, through multilateral institutions such as NATO, the United Nations, and the World Trade Organization, and through close ties with specific regional allies.” Ibid., p. 22. Moreover, he speaks approvingly of the Bush and Clinton administrations for promoting the United States’ core ideological values (p. 30), and of their efforts to expand U.S. power—albeit, he claims, this was expansion through multilateralism (p. 49). Since Wilson’s time, liberal internationalism has been the dominant force driving the United States’ quest for extraregional hegemony. For detailed discussion, see Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*, especially chaps. 1, 6.

- 32 For detailed discussion of unilateral offshore balancing, see Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*, especially chap. 8.
- 33 This theme is developed in *ibid.*, especially chaps. 1, 6, 9.

# Soft balancing against the United States

*Robert A. Pape*

From: *International Security* 30, no. 1 (June 2005): 7–45.

President George W. Bush and his administration are pursuing a profoundly new U.S. national security strategy. Since January 2001 the United States has unilaterally abandoned the Kyoto accords on global warming, rejected participation in the International Criminal Court, and withdrawn from the Antiballistic Missile (ABM) treaty, among other unilateralist foreign policies. Although the United States gained considerable international sympathy following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Bush administration chose to conduct military operations against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan with the aid of only one country: Great Britain.<sup>1</sup> In 2002 the administration announced that it would replace the Baathist regime in Iraq, a country that posed no observable threat to attack the United States, and to do so with military force “unilaterally if necessary.”<sup>2</sup> The United States went on to conquer Iraq in early 2003 despite vigorous efforts by many of the world’s major powers to delay, frustrate, and even undermine war plans and reduce the number of countries that would fight alongside the United States. Since then, the United States has threatened Iran and Syria, reaffirmed its commitment to build an ambitious ballistic missile defense system, and taken few steps to mend fences with the international community . . .

Recent international relations scholarship has promoted the view that the United States, as a unipolar leader, can act without fear of serious opposition in the international system. In the early 1990s a number of scholars argued that major powers would rise to challenge U.S. preponderance after the collapse of the Soviet Union and that unipolarity was largely an “illusion” that will not last long.<sup>3</sup> By the late 1990s, however, as it became increasingly evident that unipolarity had not immediately given way to a new round of multipolar politics, the scholarly conventional wisdom began to change. While recognizing that states have often balanced against superior power in the past, most contemporary scholars of unipolarity assert that the United States commands such a huge margin of superiority that second-class powers cannot balance against its power, either individually or collectively. As William Wohlforth writes, “The raw power advantage of the United States means that . . . second-tier states face incentives to bandwagon with the unipolar power . . .”<sup>4</sup>

## ***The logic of balancing against a sole superpower***

Major states have at least as much incentive to balance against a unipolar leader that poses a direct or indirect threat to their security as they would against strong states in a multipolar world. The main question is whether they can do so, and how.

Balancing against a unipolar leader is possible, but it does not operate according to the rules of other balance of power systems. In general, states may cope with an expansionist state through either “internal” balancing (i.e., rearmament or accelerated economic growth to

support eventual rearmament) or “external” balancing (i.e., organization of counterbalancing alliances). In most multipolar systems, both forms of balancing are possible.<sup>5</sup>

Against a unipolar leader, however, internal balancing is not a viable option because no increase in standing military forces or economic strength by just one state is adequate to the task. This follows from the definition of a unipolar world and not from specific details about individual states’ capabilities. Attempts at internal balancing by any one state are also likely to lead to a prompt, harsh response by the unipolar leader; this possibility is sufficiently obvious that individual states would rarely try such efforts on their own.<sup>6</sup>

States concerned about a unipolar leader, thus, have only the option of external balancing, but they face serious difficulties in coordinating their efforts. As developed below, soft balancing is a viable strategy for second-ranked powers to solve the coordination problems they encounter in coping with an expansionist unipolar leader. So long as the unipolar leader has not already become a global hegemon, the lesser major powers can band together to contain its predominate military power. The key question is not whether these states have the collective power to do so, but whether they can solve their collective action problem and work together to form a balancing coalition . . .

Although a sole superpower’s preponderance of strength increases the incentive for second-ranked powers to delay hard balancing until they can coordinate collective action, it does not weaken the common interest that these states have in balancing against an aggressive unipolar leader. In a unipolar system, states balance against threats, defined by the power and aggressive intentions of the revisionist state. The power of a unipolar leader may keep other states from forming a balancing coalition, but it is still a key reason why these states may wish to do so. As a result, second-ranked states that cannot solve their coordination problem by traditional means may turn to soft-balancing measures to achieve this aim.

Soft-balancing measures do not directly challenge a unipolar leader’s military preponderance, but they can delay, complicate, or increase the costs of using that extraordinary power. Nonmilitary tools, such as international institutions, economic statecraft, and strict interpretations of neutrality, can have a real, if indirect, effect on the military prospects of a unipolar leader.<sup>7</sup>

Most important, soft balancing can establish a basis of cooperation for more forceful, hard-balancing measures in the future. The logic of balancing against a sole superpower is about coordinating expectations of collective action among a number of second-ranked states. In the short term, this encourages states to pursue balancing strategies that are more effective at developing a convergence of expectations than in opposing the military power of the leading state. Building cooperation with nonmilitary tools is an effective means for this end.

The logic of unipolarity would suggest that the more aggressive the intentions of the unipolar hegemon, the more intense the balancing by second-ranked states, to the extent balancing is possible at all. If the unipolar leader does not pursue aggressively unilateral military policies, there should be little balancing of any kind against it. If, however, the unipolar leader pursues aggressive unilateral military policies that change how most of the world’s major powers view its intentions, one should expect, first, soft balancing and, if the unipolar leader’s aggressive policies do not abate, increasingly intense balancing efforts that could evolve into hard balancing . . .

### **The strategy of soft balancing**

Balancing is about equalizing the odds in a contest between the strong and the weak. States balance when they take action intended to make it hard for strong states to use their military advantage against others. The goal can be to deter a strong state from attacking or to reduce its prospects of victory in war. Traditional hard balancing seeks to change the military balance in an actual or (more often) potential conflict by contributing military capabilities to the weaker side through measures such as a military buildup, war-fighting alliance, or transfer of military technology to an ally.

#### ***How soft balancing works***

States can also seek to equalize the odds through soft balancing. Balancing can involve the utilization of tools to make a superior state's military forces harder to use without directly confronting that state's power with one's own forces. Although soft balancing relies on nonmilitary tools, it aims to have a real, if indirect, effect on the military prospects of a superior state. Mechanisms of soft balancing include territorial denial, entangling diplomacy, economic strengthening, and signaling of resolve to participate in a balancing coalition. All of these steps can weaken the military power that the superior state can bring to bear in battle.<sup>8</sup>

*Territorial denial.* Superior states often benefit from access to the territory of third parties as staging areas for ground forces or as transit for air and naval forces. Denying access to this territory can reduce the superior state's prospects for victory, such as by increasing the logistical problems for the superior state or compelling it to fight with air or sea power alone, constraints that effectively reduce the overall force that a stronger state can bring to bear against a weaker one.

*Entangling diplomacy.* Even strong states do not have complete freedom to ignore either the rules and procedures of important international organizations or accepted diplomatic practices without losing substantial support for their objectives. Accordingly, states may use international institutions and ad hoc diplomatic maneuvers to delay a superior state's plan for war and so reduce the element of surprise and give the weaker side more time to prepare; delay may even make the issue irrelevant. Especially if the superior state is also a democracy, entangling diplomacy works not only by affecting the balance of military capabilities that can be brought to bear in the dispute but also by strengthening domestic opposition to possible adventures within the superior state.

*Economic strengthening.* Militarily strong, threatening states that are the targets of balancing efforts usually derive their military superiority from possession of great economic strength. One way of balancing effectively, at least in the long run, would be to shift relative economic power in favor of the weaker side. The most obvious way of doing this is through regional trading blocs that increase trade and economic growth for members while directing trade away from nonmembers. If the superior state can be excluded from the most important such blocs, its overall trade and growth rates may suffer over time.

*Signals of resolve to balance.* Second-ranked powers seeking to act collectively against a sole superpower confront intense concern that the needed collective action will not materialize. Soft balancing, in addition to its direct usefulness in restraining aggression by a unipolar leader, may also address this problem by helping to coordinate expectations of mutual balancing behavior. If multiple states can cooperate, repeatedly, in some of the types of measures listed above, they may gradually increase their trust in each other's willingness

to cooperate against the unipolar leader's ambitions. Thus, a core purpose of soft balancing is not to coerce or even to impede the superior state's current actions, but to demonstrate resolve in a manner that signals a commitment to resist the superpower's future ambitions. Accordingly, the measure of success for soft balancing is not limited to whether the sole superpower abandons specific policies, but also includes whether more states join a soft-balancing coalition against the unipolar leader . . .

### ***The start of soft balancing against the United States***

Soft balancing is replacing traditional hard balancing as the principal reaction of major powers to the Bush administration's preventive war doctrine. Until now, there has been no concept for this form of balancing behavior, and so it has been difficult to detect that the early stages of soft balancing against U.S. power have already started.

On August 26, 2002, Vice President Dick Cheney called for the United States to launch a preventive war to depose Saddam Hussein. In September the United States issued its new strategy, asserting the right to wage preventive war against rogue states. Shortly thereafter, European, Middle Eastern, and Asian powers undertook a series of steps to contain U.S. military power using soft-balancing instruments.

First, France, Sweden, and other European states used institutional rules and procedures in the UN to delay, if not head off completely, U.S. preventive war against Iraq. In the past, the United States has often been able to legitimate foreign and military policies by gaining the approval of the UN Security Council. In September 2002 it sought to gain such sanction for war against Iraq. France, however, threatened to veto the resolution authorizing war—which would have been the first time a U.S. resolution had ever been vetoed in the Security Council—unless two conditions were met: (1) the Bush administration would have to accept a serious effort to resolve matters with Iraq through weapons inspections; and (2) it would need to wait for a resolution authorizing war until after the inspections were completed. The administration agreed, even though this meant delaying its plan for war. In March 2003 the UN's chief weapons inspector, Hans Blix, and the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed ElBaradei, declared that the inspections had made substantial progress but would take months longer to complete—a judgment that effectively prevented the United States from gaining the votes necessary for a Security Council resolution in support of the war.

Second, Turkey and Saudi Arabia firmly denied the United States the use of their territory for ground forces and have been ambiguous about providing basing rights for logistic efforts and airpower. Turkey is the most important case because Bush administration officials made repeated efforts to gain its cooperation. In January 2003 the administration asked Turkey to allow the deployment of between 60,000 to 90,000 U.S. ground troops who then would cross Turkish territory into Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq. Ankara balked. "The government has indicated its preparedness to meet American requests basically in all areas with the exception of the stationing of a large number of ground forces in Turkey," a Turkish official said. Turkey was strategically important to a low-cost, high-confidence strategy for defeating Iraq. The United States hoped to invade Iraq from Turkey in the north and Kuwait in the south, and so attack Saddam Hussein's overstretched military forces from different directions and quickly overwhelm them. Although U.S. officials expected that they could conduct a successful attack to conquer Iraq even without access to land bases in Turkey, they granted that such a war would be, as one ranking official put it, "harder and uglier." U.S. ships with an infantry division waited off the coast of Turkey for weeks, but the Turkish government remained firm.<sup>9</sup>

Third, China and South Korea are attempting to elevate their role in diplomatic negotiations over North Korea's nuclear program, making it more difficult for the United States to use force. In October 2002 North Korea admitted to having an ongoing nuclear weapons program, declaring that in response to the growing U.S. threat to its country from the Bush doctrine of preventive war, it would accelerate its efforts to build nuclear weapons. The North Korean leadership offered to halt the nuclear program if the United States would sign a nonaggression treaty agreeing not to attack their country. While the United States has refused to make this pledge, South Korea has sided with North Korea, asking the United States to sign a nonaggression treaty in return for Pyongyang's agreement to abandon nuclear development and meeting with Japanese and Russian officials to gain their support for this position. December 2002 Gallup polls show that more South Koreans had a positive view of North Korea than of the United States. Of those surveyed, 47 percent felt positively about North Korea, while 37 percent held an unfavorable view. Only 37 percent had a positive view of the United States, while 53 percent viewed it unfavorably. This represented a significant change from 1994 when 64 percent of South Koreans surveyed said they liked the United States and only 15 percent disliked it. Also in December 2002 South Korea elected a new president, Roh Moo Hyun, who advocates continuation of the sunshine policy of engagement with North Korea and who, after the election, met with military officials and instructed them to draw up plans that assume a reduction in U.S. forces stationed there. "The U.S. military presence must be adjusted," says Kim Sang-woo, a foreign policy adviser to Roh.<sup>10</sup>

None of these moves directly challenges U.S. military power, but they all make it more difficult for the United States to exercise that power. They impose immediate costs and constraints on the application of U.S. power by entangling the United States in diplomatic maneuvers, reducing the pressure on regional states to cooperate with its military plans, and bolstering the claims of target states that U.S. military threats justify the acceleration of their own military programs. They also establish a new pattern of diplomatic activity: cooperation among major powers that excludes the United States.

If the United States remains committed to its unilateral military policies, such soft-balancing measures are likely to become more common. Balancing against a sole superpower such as the United States will have a logic of its own, one perhaps not wholly unique, but one that is nonetheless distinctive to the condition of unipolarity.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Why soft balancing matters***

Soft balancing may not stop the United States from conquering a rogue state or from pursuing a vigorous nuclear buildup, but it can have significant long-term consequences for U.S. security. In the months leading up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, soft balancing had already encouraged millions of Europeans and hundreds of thousands of Americans to protest the impending war. Such protests can have important consequences for governments that support U.S. policy—or refuse to. In recent elections, German, Turkish, and even South Korean political leaders have already learned that anti-Americanism pays. Indeed, vigorous opposition to the Bush doctrine of preventive war in September 2002 was likely the pivotal factor enabling German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder to recover from a position of almost certain defeat to win a new term. Even if the leaders of Britain and other members of the "coalition of the willing" against Iraq can avoid domestic backlash, few are likely to be willing to cooperate with future U.S. military adventures.

Soft balancing can also impose real military costs. The United States may be the sole



superpower, but it is geographically isolated. To project power in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, it depends greatly on basing rights granted by local allies. Indeed, all U.S. victories since 1990—Iraq, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan—relied on the use of short-legged tactical air and ground forces based in the territory of U.S. allies in the region. Without regional allies, the United States might still be able to act unilaterally, but it would have to take higher risks in blood and treasure to do so.<sup>12</sup> Turkey's refusal to allow U.S. ground forces on its soil reduced the amount of heavy ground power available against Iraq by one-third, thus compelling the United States to significantly alter its preferred battle plan, increasing the risk of U.S. casualties in the conquest of Iraq, and leaving fewer forces to establish stability in the country after the war.

Soft balancers may also become more ambitious. As the U.S. occupation of Iraq continues, France, Germany, Russia, and China could press hard for the UN rather than the United States to oversee the administration of oil contracts in Iraq, perhaps even working with the new Iraqi government for this purpose. Even if they did not succeed, U.S. freedom of action in Iraq and elsewhere in the region would decline. If the United States gave in, it would lose control over which companies ultimately obtain contracts for Iraq's oil, and so pay a higher price for any continued presence in the region.

Further, Europeans and others may take steps that start to shift the balance of economic power against the United States. Today Europeans buy their oil in dollars, a practice that benefits the United States by creating extra demand for dollars as the world's reserve currency. This extra demand allows the United States to run outsized trade and government budget deficits at lower inflation and interest rates than would otherwise be the case. A coordinated decision by other countries to buy oil in Euros would transfer much of this benefit to Europe and decrease the United States' gross national product, possibly by as much as 1 percent, more or less permanently.<sup>13</sup>

Most important, soft balancing could eventually evolve into hard balancing. Now that the United States has conquered Iraq, major powers are likely to become quite concerned about U.S. intentions toward Iran, North Korea, and possibly Saudi Arabia. Unilateral U.S. military action against any of these states could become another focal point around which major powers' expectations of U.S. intentions could again converge. If so, then soft balancing could establish the basis for actual hard balancing against the United States.

Perhaps the most likely step toward hard balancing would be for major states to encourage and support transfers of military technology to U.S. opponents. Russia is already providing civilian nuclear technology to Iran, a state that U.S. intelligence believes is pursuing nuclear weapons. Such support is likely to continue, and major powers may facilitate this by blocking U.S. steps to put pressure on Moscow. For instance, if the United States attempts to make economic threats against Russia, European countries might open their doors to Russia wider. If they did, this would involve multiple major powers cooperating for the first time to transfer military technology to an opponent of the United States. Collective hard balancing would thus have truly begun.

Traditional realists may be tempted to dismiss soft balancing as ineffective. They should not. In the long run, soft balancing could also shift relative power between major powers and the United States and lay the groundwork to enable hard balancing if the major powers come to believe this is necessary . . .

## Notes

- 1 As an unnamed senior Bush administration official said, "The fewer people you have to rely on, the fewer permissions you have to get." Quoted in Elaine Sciolino and Steven Lee Meyers, "U.S. Plans to Act Largely Alone," *New York Times*, October 7, 2001.
- 2 "In Cheney's Words: The Administration's Case for Replacing Saddam Hussein," *New York Times*, August 27, 2002; and George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: White House, September 2002).
- 3 Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise," *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Spring 1993), pp. 5–51; Kenneth N. Waltz, "Evaluating Theories," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (December 1997), pp. 915–916; Aaron L. Friedberg, "Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia," *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Winter 1993/94), pp. 5–33; and Charles A. Kupchan, "After Pax Americana: Benign Power, Regional Integration, and the Sources of a Stable Multipolarity," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Fall 1998), pp. 40–79.
- 4 William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Summer 1999), pp. 7–8.
- 5 In bipolar systems, only internal balancing is relevant because no third state is strong enough to matter. On internal and external balancing and the logic of bipolarity, see Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979), chap. 8.
- 6 The futility of internal balancing has another important implication. Although one might think that a major power's attempts to balance a unipolar leader through internal efforts would spark local counterbalancing against the major power by other major powers, the obvious weakness of individual internal balancing against a unipolar leader means that this scenario is not likely to emerge in the first place.
- 7 Soft balancing differs from "soft power," which refers to the ability of (some) states to use the attractiveness of their social, cultural, economic, or political resources to encourage other governments and publics to accept policies favorable toward their state, society, and policies. Although uses of soft power are not limited to security issues, in principle a state with excellent soft-power resources might be in a better than average position to organize a balancing coalition (or to prevent the formation of one against it). Favorable perceptions of a unipolar leader's intentions are thus an important soft-power asset. If a unipolar leader's aggressive unilateralism undermines favorable perceptions of its intentions, this also has the effect of reducing its soft power to block the formation of a counterbalancing coalition. In general, however, soft power is an attribute of a state, whereas soft balancing involves the nonmilitary policies that states can use to limit and offset the leading state in the international system. On soft power, see Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).
- 8 Thus, soft balancing differs from everyday international diplomacy, which often seeks to resolve disputes through compromise rather than through changes in the balance of power or the use of policies that limit a strong state's military power.
- 9 Philip Stephens, "A Deadline for War Looms as Allied Enthusiasm Fades," *Financial Times*, January 10, 2003; and Michael R. Gordon, "Turkey's Reluctance on Use of Bases Worries U.S.," *New York Times*, January 9, 2003.
- 10 Peter S. Goodman, "Anti-U.S. Sentiment Deepens in S. Korea," *Washington Post*, January 9, 2003; David J. Lynch, "Many S. Koreans Pin Blame on U.S., Not North," *USA Today*, January 6, 2003; John Burton, "Seoul May Seek U.S. Pledge on N. Korea," *Financial Times*, January 4, 2003; and John Burton, "Fears Grow over Widening Rift between Seoul and U.S.," *Financial Times*, January 13, 2003.
- 11 Certain actions, such as French withdrawal from operations to enforce the no-fly zones after the U.S. Desert Fox bombing campaign in December 1998, can be viewed as antecedents to the soft balancing witnessed today. The main differences are (1) merely withdrawing support for an action is not equivalent to actively seeking to stall or prevent the leading state's use of power; and (2) action by just one state is unlikely to constitute notable balancing in a unipolar system.
- 12 In general, regional military bases serve as force multipliers, reducing the requirements for naval ships (at the distance between the United States and Asia, by more than two-thirds), lowering the costs of air transport operations (by about half in this case), and most important, making it possible to use heavy ground forces and tactical air forces (on the Korean Peninsula and in other Asian

contingencies). Michael C. Desch, "Bases for the Future: U.S. Military Interests in the Post-Cold War Third World," *Security Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Winter 1992), pp. 201–224.

- 13 Ideas for more intense soft balancing have been articulated by Chinese academics. Zhiyuan Cui, a professor at Tsinghua University in Beijing, writes that "China is naturally . . . sensitive about American aggressive unilateralism" and identifies numerous "Chinese counterbalancing efforts to set against the unipolar power of the United States . . . using China's power in the UN Security Council to seek peaceful resolutions . . . supporting the euro by diversifying China's foreign currency holding . . . developing trade and security cooperation with Russia. . . . Indeed, the increasing cooperation between China and the EU may be the most important response to the Bush Doctrine on the part of both China and the EU." Zhiyuan Cui, "The Bush Doctrine: A Chinese Perspective," in David Held and Mathias Koenig-Archibugi, eds., *American Power in the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), pp. 241–251.

# Waiting for balancing

## Why the world is not pushing back

*Keir A. Lieber and Gerard Alexander*

From: *International Security* 30, no. 1 (June 2005): 109–39.

Many scholars and policy analysts predicted the emergence of balancing against the United States following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Since then, however, great power balancing—when states seriously commit themselves to containing a threatening state—has failed to emerge, despite a huge increase in the preponderant power of the United States. More recently, the prospect and then onset of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003 generated renewed warnings of an incipient global backlash. Some observers claim that signs of traditional balancing by states—that is, internal defense buildups or external alliance formation—can already be detected. Others suggest that such “hard balancing” may not be occurring. Instead, they argue that the world is witnessing a new phenomenon of “soft balancing,” in which states seek to undermine and restrain U.S. power in ways that fall short of classic measures. But in both versions, many believe that the wait is over and that the world is beginning to push back.

This article argues, in contrast, that both lines of argument are unpersuasive. The past few years have certainly witnessed a surge in resentment and criticism of specific U.S. policies. But great power balancing against the United States has yet to occur, a finding that we maintain offers important insights into states’ perceptions and intentions. The United States’ nearest rivals are not ramping up defense spending to counter U.S. power, nor have these states sought to pool their efforts or resources for counterbalancing. We argue, further, that discussion of soft balancing is much ado about nothing. Defining or operationalizing the concept is difficult; the behavior typically identified by it seems identical to normal diplomatic friction; and, regardless, the evidence does not support specific predictions suggested by those advancing the concept.

Global interactions during and after the Iraq war have been filled with both a great deal of stasis—as many states leave their policies toward the United States fundamentally unchanged—and ironies, such as repeated requests by the United States for its allies to substantially boost their military spending and capabilities, requests that so far have gone unfilled. Moreover, U.S. relations with regional powers such as China, Russia, India, and other key states (e.g., Egypt, Jordan, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia) have improved in recent years. These revealing events and trends are underappreciated by many, perhaps most, analyses in search of balancing.

The lack of balancing behavior against the United States constitutes a genuine puzzle for many observers, with serious implications both for theorizing and for U.S. foreign policy making, and so is a puzzle worth explaining . . .

## Evidence of a lack of soft balancing

In the absence of evidence of traditional balancing, some scholars have advanced the concept of soft balancing. Instead of overtly challenging U.S. power, which might be too costly or unappealing, states are said to be able to undertake a host of lesser actions as a way of constraining and undermining it. The central claim is that the unilateralist and provocative behavior of the United States is generating unprecedented resentment that will make life difficult for Washington and may eventually evolve into traditional hard balancing.<sup>1</sup> As Walt writes, “States may not want to attract the ‘focused enmity’ of the United States, but they may be eager to limit its freedom of action, complicate its diplomacy, sap its strength and resolve, maximize their own autonomy and reaffirm their own rights, and generally make the United States work harder to achieve its objectives.”<sup>2</sup> For Josef Joffe, “‘Soft balancing’ against Mr. Big has already set in.”<sup>3</sup> Pape proclaims that “the early stages of soft balancing against American power have already started,” and argues that “unless the United States radically changes course, the use of international institutions, economic leverage, and diplomatic maneuvering to frustrate American intentions will only grow.”<sup>4</sup>

We offer two critiques of these claims. First, if we consider the specific predictions suggested by these theorists on their own terms, we do not find persuasive evidence of soft balancing. Second, these criteria for detecting soft balancing are, on reflection, inherently flawed because they do not (and possibly cannot) offer effective means for distinguishing soft balancing from routine diplomatic friction between countries. These are, in that sense, nonfalsifiable claims.

## Evaluating soft-balancing predictions

Theorists have offered several criteria for judging the presence of soft balancing. We consider four frequently invoked ones: states’ efforts (1) to entangle the dominant state in international institutions, (2) to exclude the dominant state from regional economic cooperation, (3) to undermine the dominant state’s ability to project military power by restricting or denying military basing rights, and (4) to provide relevant assistance to U.S. adversaries such as rogue states.<sup>5</sup>

*Entangling international institutions.* Are other states using international institutions to constrain or undermine U.S. power? The notion that they could do so is based on faulty logic. Because the most powerful states exercise the most control in these institutions, it is unreasonable to expect that their rules and procedures can be used to shackle and restrain the world’s most powerful state. As Randall Schweller notes, institutions cannot be simultaneously autonomous and capable of binding strong states.<sup>6</sup> Certainly what resistance there was to endorsing the U.S.-led action in Iraq did not stop or meaningfully delay that action.

Is there evidence, however, that other states are even trying to use a web of global institutional rules and procedures or ad hoc diplomatic maneuvers to constrain U.S. behavior and delay or disrupt military actions? No attempt was made to block the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan, and both the war and the ensuing stabilization there have been almost entirely conducted through an international institution: NATO. Although a number of countries refused to endorse the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, none sought to use international institutions to block or declare illegal that invasion. Logically, such action should be the benchmark for this aspect of soft balancing, not whether states voted for the invasion. No evidence exists that such an effort was launched or that one would have succeeded had it been. Moreover, since the Iraqi regime was toppled, the UN has endorsed and assisted the transition to Iraqi sovereignty.<sup>7</sup>

If anything, other states' ongoing cooperation with the United States explains why international institutions continue to amplify American power and facilitate the pursuit of its strategic objectives. As we discuss below, the war on terror is being pursued primarily through regional institutions, bilateral arrangements, and new multilateral institutions, most obviously the Proliferation Security and Container Security Initiatives, both of which have attracted new adherents since they were launched.<sup>8</sup>

*Economic statecraft.* Is post-September 11 regional economic cooperation increasingly seeking to exclude the United States so as to make the balance of power less favorable to it? The answer appears to be no. The United States has been one of the primary drivers of trade regionalization, not the excluded party. This is not surprising given that most states, including those with the most power, have good reason to want lower, not higher, trade barriers around the large and attractive U.S. market.

This rationale applies, for instance, to suits brought in the World Trade Organization against certain U.S. trade policies. These suits are generally aimed at gaining access to U.S. markets, not sidelining them. For example, the suits challenging agricultural subsidies are part of a general challenge by developing countries to Western (including European) trade practices.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, many of these disputes predate September 11; therefore, relabeling them a form of soft balancing in reaction to post-September 11 U.S. strategy is not credible. For the moment, there also does not appear to be any serious discussion of a coordinated decision to price oil in Euros, which might undercut the United States' ability to run large trade and budget deficits without proportional increases in inflation and interest rates.<sup>10</sup>

*Restrictions on basing rights/territorial denial.* The geographical isolation of the United States could effectively diminish its relative power advantage. This prediction appears to be supported by Turkey's denial of the Bush administration's request to provide coalition ground forces with transit rights for the invasion of Iraq, and possibly by diminished Saudi support for bases there. In addition, Pape suggests that countries such as Germany, Japan, and South Korea will likely impose new restrictions or reductions on U.S. forces stationed on their soil.

The overall U.S. overseas basing picture, however, looks brighter today than it did only a few years ago. Since September 11 the United States has established new bases and negotiated landing rights across Africa, Asia, Central Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. All told, it has built, upgraded, or expanded military facilities in Afghanistan, Bulgaria, Diego Garcia, Djibouti, Georgia, Hungary, Iraq, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Oman, Pakistan, the Philippines, Poland, Qatar, Romania, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.<sup>11</sup>

The diplomatic details of the basing issue also run contrary to soft-balancing predictions. Despite occasionally hostile domestic opinion surveys, most host countries do not want to see the withdrawal of U.S. forces. The economic and strategic benefits of hosting bases outweigh purported desires to make it more difficult for the United States to exercise power. For example, the Philippines asked the United States to leave Subic Bay in the 1990s (well before the emergence of the Bush Doctrine), but it has been angling ever since for a return. U.S. plans to withdraw troops from South Korea are facing local resistance and have triggered widespread anxiety about the future of the United States' security commitment to the peninsula.<sup>12</sup> German defense officials and businesses are displeased with the U.S. plan to replace two army divisions in Germany with a single light armored brigade and transfer a wing of F-16 fighter jets to Incirlik Air Base in Turkey.<sup>13</sup> (Indeed, Turkey recently agreed to allow the United States expanded use of the base as a major hub for deliveries to Iraq and Afghanistan.)<sup>14</sup>



The recently announced plan to redeploy or withdraw up to 70,000 U.S. troops from Cold War bases in Asia and Europe is not being driven by host-country rejection, but by a reassessment of global threats to U.S. interests and the need to bolster American power-projection capabilities.<sup>15</sup> If anything, the United States has the freedom to move forces out of certain countries because it has so many options about where else to send them, in this case closer to the Middle East and other regions crucial to the war on terror. For example, the United States is discussing plans to concentrate all special operations and antiterrorist units in Europe in a single base in Spain—a country presumably primed for soft balancing against the United States given its newly elected prime minister's opposition to the war in Iraq—so as to facilitate an increasing number of military operations in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>16</sup>

*The enemy of my enemy is my friend.* Finally, as Pape asserts, if “Europe, Russia, China, and other important regional states were to offer economic and technological assistance to North Korea, Iran, and other ‘rogue states,’ this would strengthen these states, run counter to key Bush administration policies, and demonstrate the resolve to oppose the United States by assisting its enemies.”<sup>17</sup> Pape presumably has in mind Russian aid to Iran in building nuclear power plants (with the passive acquiescence of Europeans), South Korean economic assistance to North Korea, previous French and Russian resistance to sanctions against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and perhaps Pakistan's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) assistance to North Korea, Iraq, and Libya.

There are at least two reasons to question whether any of these actions is evidence of soft balancing. First, none of this so-called cooperation with U.S. adversaries is unambiguously driven by a strategic logic of undermining U.S. power. Instead, other explanations are readily at hand. South Korean economic aid to North Korea is better explained by purely local motivations: common ethnic bonds in the face of famine and deprivation, and Seoul's fears of the consequences of any abrupt collapse of the North Korean regime. The other cases of “cooperation” appear to be driven by a common nonstrategic motivation: pecuniary gain. Abdul Qadeer Khan, the father of Pakistan's nuclear program, was apparently motivated by profits when he sold nuclear technology and methods to several states. And given its domestic economic problems and severe troubles in Chechnya, Russia appears far more interested in making money from Iran than in helping to bring about an “Islamic bomb.”<sup>18</sup> The quest for lucrative contracts provides at least as plausible, if banal, an explanation for French cooperation with Saddam Hussein.

Moreover, this soft-balancing claim runs counter to diverse multilateral nonproliferation efforts aimed at Iran, North Korea, and Libya (before its decision to abandon its nuclear program). The Europeans have been quite vocal in their criticism of Iranian noncompliance with the Nonproliferation Treaty and International Atomic Energy Agency guidelines, and the Chinese and Russians are actively cooperating with the United States and others over North Korea. The EU's 2003 European security strategy document declares that rogue states “should understand that there is a price to be paid” for their behavior, “including in their relationship” with the EU.<sup>19</sup> These major powers have a declared disinterest in aiding rogue states above and beyond what they might have to lose by attracting the focused enmity of the United States.

In sum, the evidence for claims and predictions of soft balancing is poor.

### ***Distinguishing soft balancing from traditional diplomatic friction***

There is a second, more important, reason to be skeptical of soft-balancing claims. The criteria they offer for detecting the presence of soft balancing are conceptually flawed.

Walt defines soft balancing as “conscious coordination of diplomatic action in order to obtain outcomes contrary to U.S. preferences, outcomes that could not be gained if the balancers did not give each other some degree of mutual support.”<sup>20</sup> This and other accounts are problematic in a crucial way. Conceptually, seeking outcomes that a state (such as the United States) does not prefer does not necessarily or convincingly reveal a desire to balance that state geostrategically. For example, one trading partner often seeks outcomes that the other does not prefer, without balancing being relevant to the discussion. Thus, empirically, the types of events used to operationalize definitions such as Walt’s do not clearly establish the crucial claim of soft-balancing theorists: states’ desires to balance the United States. Widespread anti-Americanism can be present (and currently seems to be) without that fact persuasively revealing impulses to balance the United States.

The events used to detect the presence of soft balancing are so typical in history that they are not, and perhaps cannot be, distinguished from routine diplomatic friction between countries, even between allies. Traditional balancing criteria are useful because they can reasonably, though surely not perfectly, help distinguish between real balancing behavior and policies or diplomatic actions that may look and sound like an effort to check the power of the dominant state but that in actuality reflect only cheap talk, domestic politics, other international goals not related to balances of power, or the resentment of particular leaders. The current formulation of the concept of soft balancing is not distinguished from such behavior. Even if the predictions were correct, they would not unambiguously or even persuasively reveal balancing behavior, soft or otherwise.

Our criticism is validated by the long list of events from 1945 to 2001 that are directly comparable to those that are today coded as soft balancing. These events include diplomatic maneuvering by U.S. allies and nonaligned countries against the United States in international institutions (particularly the UN), economic statecraft aimed against the United States, resistance to U.S. military basing, criticism of U.S. military interventions, and waves of anti-Americanism.

In the 1950s a West Europe-only bloc was formed, designed partly as a political and economic counterweight to the United States within the so-called free world, and France created an independent nuclear capability. In the 1960s a cluster of mostly developing countries organized the Nonaligned Movement, defining itself against both superpowers. France pulled out of NATO’s military structure. Huge demonstrations worldwide protested the U.S. war in Vietnam and other U.S. Cold War policies. In the 1970s the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries wielded its oil weapon to punish U.S. policies in the Middle East and transfer substantial wealth from the West. Waves of extensive anti-Americanism were pervasive in Latin America in the 1950s and 1960s, and Europe and elsewhere in the late 1960s and early 1970s and again in the early-to-mid 1980s. Especially prominent protests and harsh criticism from intellectuals and local media were mounted against U.S. policies toward Central America under President Ronald Reagan, the deployment of theater nuclear weapons in Europe, and the very idea of missile defense. In the Reagan era, many states coordinated to protect existing UN practices, promote the 1982 Law of the Sea treaty, and oppose aid to the Nicaraguan Contras. In the 1990s the Philippines asked the United States to leave its Subic Bay military base; China continued a long-standing military buildup; and China, France, and Russia coordinated to resist UN-sanctioned uses of force against Iraq. China and Russia declared a strategic partnership in 1996. In 1998 the “European troika” meetings and agreements began between France, Germany, and Russia, and the EU announced the creation of an independent, unified European military force. In many of these years, the United States was engaged in numerous trade clashes, including

with close EU allies. Given all this, it is not surprising that contemporary scholars and commentators periodically identified “crises” in U.S. relations with the world, including within the Atlantic Alliance.<sup>21</sup>

These events all rival in seriousness the categories of events that some scholars today identify as soft balancing. Indeed, they are not merely difficult to distinguish conceptually from those later events; in many cases they are impossible to distinguish empirically, being literally the same events or trends that are currently labeled soft balancing. Yet they all occurred in years in which even soft-balancing theorists agree that the United States was not being balanced against.<sup>22</sup> It is thus unclear whether accounts of soft balancing have provided criteria for crisply and rigorously distinguishing that concept from these and similar manifestations of diplomatic friction routine to many periods of history, even in relations between countries that remain allies rather than strategic competitors. For example, these accounts provide no method for judging whether post-September 11 international events constitute soft balancing, whereas similar phenomena during Reagan’s presidency—the spread of anti-Americanism, coordination against the United States in international institutions, criticism of interventions in the developing countries, and so on—do not. Without effective criteria for making such distinctions, current claims of soft balancing risk blunting rather than advancing knowledge about international political dynamics.

In sum, we detect no persuasive evidence that U.S. policy is provoking the seismic shift in other states’ strategies toward the United States that theorists of balancing identify.

### **Why countries are not balancing against the United States**

The major powers are not balancing against the United States because of the nature of U.S. grand strategy in the post-September 11 world. There is no doubt that this strategy is ambitious, assertive, and backed by tremendous offensive military capability. But it is also highly selective and not broadly threatening. Specifically, the United States is focusing these means on the greatest threats to its interests—that is, the threats emanating from nuclear proliferator states and global terrorist organizations. Other major powers are not balancing U.S. power because they want the United States to succeed in defeating these shared threats or are ambivalent yet understand they are not in its crosshairs. In many cases, the diplomatic friction identified by proponents of the concept of soft balancing instead reflects disagreement about tactics, not goals, which is nothing new in history.

To be sure, our analysis cannot claim to rule out other theories of great power behavior that also do not expect balancing against the United States. Whether the United States is not seen as a threat worth balancing because of shared interests in nonproliferation and the war on terror (as we argue), because of geography and capability limitations that render U.S. global hegemony impossible (as some offensive realists argue), or because transnational democratic values, binding international institutions, and economic interdependence obviate the need to balance (as many liberals argue) is a task for further theorizing and empirical analysis. Nor are we claiming that balancing against the United States will never happen. Rather, there is no persuasive evidence that U.S. policy is provoking the kind of balancing behavior that the Bush administration’s critics suggest. In the meantime, analysts should continue to use credible indicators of balancing behavior in their search for signs that U.S. strategy is having a counterproductive effect on U.S. security . . .

## Notes

- 1 Layne writes, "By facilitating 'soft balancing' against the United States, the Iraq crisis may have paved the way for 'hard' balancing as well." Christopher Layne, "America as European Hegemon," *National Interest*, No. 72 (Summer 2003), p. 27. See also Stephen M. Walt, "Can the United States Be Balanced? If So, How?," paper prepared for the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois, September 2–5, 2004, p. 18; and Robert A. Pape, "Soft Balancing: How States Pursue Security in a Unipolar World," paper prepared for the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois, September 2–5, 2004, p. 27. See also T.V. Paul, "Introduction" in T.V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann, eds., *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 2–4, 11–17.
- 2 Stephen M. Walt, "Keeping the World 'Off-Balance': Self-Restraint and U.S. Foreign Policy," in G. John Ikenberry, ed., *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 136; and Walt, "Can the United States Be Balanced?"
- 3 Josef Joffe, "Gulliver Unbound: Can America Rule the World?" August 6, 2003, <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/08/05/1060064182993.html>.
- 4 Pape, "Soft Balancing: How States Pursue Security in a Unipolar World," p. 29; and Pape, "The World Pushes Back," *Boston Globe*, March 23, 2003.
- 5 These and other soft-balancing predictions can be found in Walt, "Can the United States Be Balanced?"; Pape, "Soft Balancing: How States Pursue Security in a Unipolar World," pp. 27–29; and Robert A. Pape, "Soft Balancing: How the World Will Respond to U.S. Preventive War on Iraq," article posted on the Oak Park Coalition for Truth & Justice website, January 20, 2003, <http://www.opctj.org/articles/robert-a-pape-university-of-chicago-02-21-2003-004443.html>].
- 6 Randall L. Schweller, "The Problem of International Order Revisited: A Review Essay," *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Summer 2001), p. 182.
- 7 Before the invasion, Pape predicted that "after the war, Europe, Russia, and China could press hard for the United Nations rather than the United States to oversee a new Iraqi government. Even if they didn't succeed, this would reduce the freedom of action for the United States in Iraq and elsewhere in the region." See Pape, "Soft Balancing: How the World Will Respond to U.S. Preventive War on Iraq." As we note above, the transitional process was in fact endorsed by the Bush administration, and if anything, it has pressed for greater UN participation, which China, France, and Russia, among others, have resisted. This constitutes resistance to U.S. requests, but it hardly constitutes use of institutions to constrain U.S. action.
- 8 The Proliferation Security Initiative's initial members were Australia, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Singapore, Spain, and the United States.
- 9 The resistance of France and others to agricultural trade liberalization could be interpreted as an attempt to limit U.S. economic power by restricting access to their markets by highly competitive U.S. agribusiness. But then, presumably, contrasting support for liberalization by most developing countries would have to be interpreted as expressing support for expanded U.S. power.
- 10 For an insightful discussion of why this may well remain the case, see Herman Schwartz, "Ties That Bind: Global Macroeconomic Flows and America's Financial Empire," paper prepared for the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois, September 2–5, 2004.
- 11 See James Sterngold, "After 9/11, U.S. Policy Built on World Bases," *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 21, 2004, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/org/news/2004/040321-world-bases.htm>; David Rennie, "America's Growing Network of Bases," *Daily Telegraph*, September 11, 2003, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/org/news/2003/030911-deployments01.htm>; and "Worldwide Reorientation of U.S. Military Basing in Prospect," Center for Defense Information, September 19, 2003, and "Worldwide Reorientation of U.S. Military Basing, Part 2: Central Asia, Southwest Asia, and the Pacific," Center for Defense Information, October 7, 2003, <http://www.cdi.org/program/documents.cfm?ProgramID=37>.
- 12 Strategic and economic worries are easily intertwined. In response to prospective changes in U.S. policy, the South Korean defense ministry is seeking a 13 percent increase in its 2005 budget request. See "U.S. Troop Withdrawals from South Korea," *IJSS Strategic Comments*, Vol. 10, No. 5 (June 2004). Pape suggests both that Japan and South Korea could ask all U.S. forces to leave

their territory and that they do not want the United States to leave because it is a potentially indispensable support for the status quo in the region. See Pape, "Soft Balancing: How States Pursue Security in a Unipolar World."

- 13 "Proposed U.S. Base Closures Send a Shiver through a German Town," *New York Times*, August 22, 2004.
- 14 "Turkey OKs Expanded U.S. Use of Key Air Base," *Los Angeles Times*, May 3, 2005.
- 15 Kurt Campbell and Celeste Johnson Ward, "New Battle Stations?" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 82, No. 5 (September/October 2003), pp. 95–103.
- 16 "Spain, U.S. to Mull Single Europe Special Ops Base—Report," *Wall Street Journal*, May 2, 2005.
- 17 Pape, "Soft Balancing: How the World Will Respond to U.S. Preventive War on Iraq"; and Pape, "Soft Balancing: How States Pursue Security in a Unipolar World," pp. 31–32.
- 18 The importance of the sums Russia is earning, compared to its military spending and arms exports, is suggested in International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance, 2003–2004* (London: IISS, 2003), 270–271, 273.
- 19 European Union, "A Secure Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy," Brussels, December 12, 2003, <http://ue.eu.int/uedocs/cmsUpload/78367.pdf>.
- 20 Walt, "Can the United States Be Balanced?" p. 14.
- 21 See, for example, Eliot A. Cohen, "The Long-Term Crisis of the Alliance," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (Winter 1982/83), pp. 325–343; Sanford J. Ungar, ed., *Estrangement: America and the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); and Stephen M. Walt, "The Ties That Fray: Why Europe and America Are Drifting Apart," *National Interest*, No. 54 (Winter 1998–99), pp. 3–11.
- 22 Walt, "Keeping the World 'Off-Balance'"; and Pape, "Soft Balancing: How States Pursue Security in a Unipolar World," p. 13.

## 13 Realism and European cooperation

The previous chapter investigated a puzzle for those realist research traditions that predict a balanced international system, namely the persistence of American dominance. A second anomaly with which realists struggle is the considerable European cooperation, and even integration, since the end of the Cold War. European cooperation during the Cold War could more easily be attributed to an external Soviet threat. It is much harder for realists to make a convincing argument for continuing cooperation after that threat disappeared.

One possible realist response to this anomalous European optimism is “wait a bit.” This suggests that institutions have a momentum that carries them forward, even in the absence of the cause that sparked their creation. According to this argument, although there may be a lag before European competition is rekindled, it is simply a matter of time.

Another, perhaps more confident, response is that European cooperation does not contradict realist understandings, even if it continues. According to this view, European cooperation can be explained by realist theories about alliance behavior and balancing. Hence, the cooperation can be seen as a direct attempt by Europe’s larger states to balance the power of the U.S. and thus to curtail American hegemony. Critics of this “European cooperation is balancing” view have responded by suggesting that European intergovernmental institutions are neither designed to, nor capable of, engaging in the sorts of activities that would be necessary to countervail U.S. power.

The first reading selection included in this chapter represents the pessimistic view that Europe’s future is likely to be characterized by fear and security competition. John Mearsheimer first suggested in the early 1990s that Europe would again be entangled in conflict reminiscent of the pre-Cold War days. Mearsheimer reiterates this view in the article selection included in this chapter, arguing that the absence of a superpower threat in Europe will compel the U.S. to withdraw from the region and leave the nations of Europe to fend for themselves. Mearsheimer predicts that, after the removal of U.S. troops from the continent and the disbanding of NATO, Germany will look to acquire nuclear weapons and take on a more assertive role in Europe. This will produce substantial worry in Britain, France, and Russia, whose leaders will be constrained to challenge Germany’s rise with traditional balancing countermeasures that could lead to war.

Barry Posen does not share Mearsheimer’s bleak prediction about European security competition. In his article “European Union security and defense policy,” Posen argues that European cooperation is likely to continue unabated, especially in the areas of regional and international security. Posen bases this estimate on the argument that the European Union (EU) is now an active participant in the business of balancing U.S. power. For Posen, the EU’s European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) is a direct challenge to American hegemony. Although he admits that it is a fairly weak attempt at balancing, Posen insists that



ESDP supports the views of neorealists, who long ago predicted that U.S. superiority would be challenged by the international system's major players.

Jolyon Howorth and Anand Menon, however, question this interpretation of European cooperation. In their article "Still not pushing back: Why the European Union is not balancing the United States," the authors argue that European states lack a sufficient motive to balance against the U.S. They suggest instead that the ESDP is a simple reflection of the EU's desire to be an active participant in regional security matters and humanitarian missions. For Howorth and Menon, ESDP is not currently a vehicle for challenging American hegemony and it was never intended to be one. This explains why ESDP lacks the leadership and capabilities that would be necessary for the EU to challenge American hegemony in any serious way.

# The future of the American pacifier

*John J. Mearsheimer*

From: *Foreign Affairs* 80, no. 5 (September/October 2001): 46–61.

## Passing the buck

The central aim of American foreign policy has traditionally been to dominate the western hemisphere while not permitting another great power to dominate Europe or Northeast Asia. The United States has not wanted a peer competitor. In the wake of the Cold War, U.S. policymakers remain firmly committed to this goal. An important Pentagon planning document stated in 1992, “Our first objective is to prevent the reemergence of a new rival . . . that poses a threat on the order of that posed formerly by the Soviet Union. . . . Our strategy must now refocus on precluding the emergence of any potential future global competitor.”

In pursuit of this goal, the United States has behaved as an offshore balancer, committing troops to Europe and Northeast Asia only when there was a potential hegemon in those neighborhoods that the local powers could not contain by themselves. In effect, the United States has followed a “buck-passing” strategy—remaining on the sidelines while getting others to bear the burden of deterring or fighting aggressors—until it could no longer do so safely. Unless this realist pattern of behavior changes radically, the future of the U.S. military commitments to Europe and Northeast Asia can thus be expected to hinge on whether a potential hegemon emerges in either region that can be contained only with American help. If not, the more than 100,000 U.S. troops based in each region will probably leave in the first decade or so of the new century.

Europe and Northeast Asia are stable and peaceful today. Many attribute this quiescence to regional integration, or democracy, or the replacement of militaristic strategic cultures with pacific ones. In fact, however, the current peace and stability are based largely on auspicious distributions of power that make war highly unlikely.

But if the power structures that are now in place in Europe and Northeast Asia are benign, they are not sustainable for much longer. The most likely scenario in Europe is an eventual American exit coupled with the emergence of Germany as the dominant state. In effect, the region will probably move from its present bipolarity (with the United States and Russia as the poles) to unbalanced multipolarity, which will lead to more intense security competition among the European powers . . .

## The sheriff leaves town

Hardly any evidence before 1990 suggests that Washington is willing to commit troops to Europe or Northeast Asia except to block the imminent rise of a peer competitor. One might concede this history but argue that the more relevant evidence is what has happened over the last decade. It is true that during the 1990s substantial numbers of American troops remained

abroad even though no great power threatened to dominate Europe or Northeast Asia. Too little time has passed since the Cold War ended, however, to make a judgment about whether U.S. forces will stay put for long in the absence of the Soviet threat or its equivalent.

The Soviet Union broke apart at the end of 1991, only ten years ago, and the last Russian troops were removed from the former East Germany in 1994, a mere seven years ago. Given the suddenness of the Soviet collapse and its profound effect on the balance of power in Europe and Northeast Asia, the United States has needed time to figure out what these changes mean for American interests. By way of comparison, World War I ended in 1918, but U.S. troops were not completely withdrawn from Europe until 1923, and British troops remained on the continent until 1930—12 years after the fighting stopped.

Simple inertia has also been an important factor in delaying the American withdrawal. The United States has maintained large-scale military forces in Europe since 1943, when it invaded Italy during World War II, and in Northeast Asia since 1945, when it occupied Japan at the end of that war. Both NATO and the American alliance structure in Northeast Asia are institutions with deep roots that helped win a spectacular victory in the Cold War, and the United States could not walk away from them overnight. Furthermore, maintaining forces in Europe and Northeast Asia in the past decade has been relatively cheap and painless. Not only has the American economy flourished during this period, generating large budget surpluses in the process, but China and Russia have been easy to contain, because they have been much weaker than the United States.

There is considerable evidence, however, that the United States and its Cold War allies are now beginning to drift apart. This trend is most apparent in Europe, where NATO'S 1999 war against Serbia and its messy aftermath have damaged transatlantic relations and prompted the European Union to begin building a military force of its own that can operate independently of NATO—meaning the United States. The United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Italy are slowly but inexorably realizing that they want to provide for their own security and control their own destiny. They are less willing to take orders from the United States than they were during the Cold War. Japan, too, is showing signs of independent behavior. And the U.S. commitment to defend Europe and Northeast Asia is weakening. Public opinion polls and congressional sentiment seem to indicate that the United States has become, at best, what one commentator has called a “reluctant sheriff” on the world stage. Over time, therefore, the U.S. military role abroad is likely to diminish, not increase.

Given that the United States is widely recognized to be a pacifying force in Europe and Northeast Asia, one might wonder why its allies would assert their independence from the United States, a move that is almost certain to cause transatlantic friction. Some might say that this is evidence that Washington's former allies are now trying to balance the mighty United States. But that response is not convincing, because the United States has no appetite for conquest and domination outside of the western hemisphere. Offshore balancers do not provoke balancing coalitions against themselves; indeed, their main mission is to help balance against others.

America's Cold War allies have started to act less like dependents and more like sovereign states because—being perhaps more perceptive than Washington's own foreign policy elites—they fear that the offshore balancer that has protected them for so long might prove to be unreliable in a future crisis. The reliability of the United States was not a serious problem during the Cold War, because the Soviet threat provided a powerful incentive for the United States to protect its allies, who were too weak to defend themselves. The absence of that threat, however, has led America's allies to question how long the United States will take its commitment to their security seriously. Moreover, it has created a situation in which

states such as Germany and Japan have the option of trying to protect themselves without American help.

The United States is also bound to raise doubts about whether it is a wise and reliable ally thanks to the policies it pursues, if only because U.S. interests are not identical to those of its friends. For example, President Bill Clinton, hoping to improve Sino-American relations, visited China for nine days in 1998 without stopping in Japan. His itinerary was seen by Japanese leaders as evidence that their alliance with the United States was weakening. In Europe, the ongoing Balkan crises have raised doubts about American leadership. The United States and its European allies, moreover, have conflicting views about Middle East policy, about employing NATO forces outside of Europe, and especially about developing a national missile defense. Over time, differences of this sort are likely to cause America's allies to provide for their own security, rather than rely on the United States.

In sum, the brief history of the 1990s is not a good indicator of what the future holds for U.S. military involvement in Europe and Northeast Asia. That issue will likely be resolved in the early years of the current century, and the determining factor will be whether a potential hegemon emerges in either region that the United States must help contain. Only the threat of a peer competitor is likely to provide sufficient incentive for the United States to risk involvement in a distant great-power war.

## **Europe's future**

Five European states now have sufficient wealth and population to qualify as potential great powers: the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, and Russia. Of these, however, only Germany has the earmarks of a potential hegemon. It is the wealthiest European state, has the second-largest population (after Russia), and has the most powerful army in the region. Nevertheless, Germany is not a great power today, much less a potential hegemon, because it has no nuclear weapons of its own and because it is heavily dependent on the United States for its security. If American troops were pulled out of Europe, however, and Germany became responsible for its own defense, it would probably acquire its own nuclear arsenal and increase the size of its army, transforming itself into something much more formidable.

To illustrate Germany's potential military might, consider the population and wealth differentials between Germany and Russia during the twentieth century. Although Russia has always enjoyed a significant population advantage over Germany, its present edge is smaller than at any other time in the past hundred years. For example, Russia had approximately 2.6 times as many people as Germany in 1913 (175 million vs. 67 million), and twice as many in 1940 (170 million vs. 85 million). Despite this population disadvantage, Germany was a potential hegemon in both those years because of its marked advantage in wealth. It had a roughly 3.6-to-1 advantage in industrial might over Russia in 1913, and a 1.3-to-1 advantage in 1940.

Over the last 15 years, the balance has shifted quite rapidly in Germany's favor, bringing it back to a very powerful position. In 1987, a representative year of the Cold War, the Soviet Union had roughly 4.7 times as many people as did West Germany (285 million vs. 61 million). Russia today, however, has only about 1.8 times as many people as Germany (147 million vs. 82 million), and Germany has a startling 6.6-to-1 advantage in wealth. Thus Germany now has a significant advantage in latent power over Russia, much like it had in the early twentieth century, when it was the dominant power in Europe.

Germany also has an advantage in conventional military power. The size of Germany's standing army is 221,000 soldiers, and it can be quickly augmented by 295,400 reserves,

thus creating a highly effective fighting force of more than half a million soldiers. Russia has about 348,000 soldiers in its standing army, and although it has a large pool of reserves, they are poorly trained and hard to mobilize quickly and efficiently in a crisis. In terms of quality, the German army is well trained and well led, whereas the Russian army is neither. Only on the nuclear front does Russia dominate, but Germany has the wherewithal to rectify this asymmetry if it chooses to.

Yet even though Germany is likely to become a potential hegemon if it has to provide for its own security, the United States is still likely to pull its forces out of Europe. Why? Because despite Germany's significant military potential, other European powers should be able to keep it from dominating Europe without help from the United States. The United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Russia together have about three times as many people as Germany does, and their combined wealth is roughly three times greater than Germany's. The United Kingdom, France, and Russia all have nuclear weapons, moreover, providing a strong deterrent against an expansionist Germany even if it does develop its own nuclear option.

Without the American pacifier, Europe is not guaranteed to remain peaceful. Indeed, intense security competition among the great powers would likely ensue because, upon American withdrawal, Europe would go from benign bipolarity to unbalanced multipolarity, the most dangerous kind of power structure. The United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Germany would have to build up their own military forces and provide for their own security. In effect, they would all become great powers, making Europe multipolar and raising the ever-present possibility that they might fight among themselves. And Germany would probably become a potential hegemon and thus the main source of worry.

Looking at Europe today, such a forecast might appear far-fetched, but that is because few are prepared to consider how radically the European security environment will be transformed by the withdrawal of U.S. troops. Once the major European powers are forced to provide for their own defense, suspicions among them are certain to grow, thereby triggering the familiar dynamics of great-power competition.

The kind of trouble that might lie ahead for Europe can be illustrated by considering how particular German measures aimed at enhancing its security might nevertheless lead to instability. If the United States removed its security umbrella from over western Europe, Germany would likely move to acquire its own nuclear arsenal. This would be the case both because nuclear weapons are an excellent deterrent, as Germany's governing elites recognized during the Cold War, but also because it would be the best way to escape potential coercion by its three nuclear-armed neighbors. During the proliferation process, however, these neighbors would probably contemplate using force to prevent Germany from going nuclear, and the result could be a major crisis.

Without the American military on its territory, furthermore, Germany would probably increase the size of its army and certainly would be more inclined to try to dominate central Europe. Why? Because Germany would fear Russian control of that critically important buffer zone between them. Of course, Russia would have the same fear in reverse, which would likely lead to a serious security competition between them for control of central Europe. France, meanwhile, would undoubtedly view such behavior by Germany with alarm and take measures to protect itself—for example, by increasing its defense spending and establishing closer relations with Russia. Germany, of course, would perceive these actions as hostile and respond with measures of its own.

Depending on what happens with Russia, however, Europe's future could turn out differently. It is conceivable, although unlikely, that Russia, rather than Germany, will

become Europe's next potential hegemon. For this to happen, Russia would need to match its large population with greater wealth. Although it is hard to imagine this happening over the next 20 years, if it did so the other European powers would probably be able to contain the potential Russian threat on their own. A wealthy Russia would not be a paper tiger, but it would not be so formidable that U.S. troops would be needed to contain it.

Russia could also go in the other direction: its economy could collapse, possibly causing severe political turmoil, and the country could effectively be removed from the ranks of the great powers. But in this event, the other European powers would not be strong enough to contain Germany on their own, and would need help from the United States. This alternative future is not likely to come about either, but if it did, U.S. troops would surely remain in Europe to help the United Kingdom, France, and Italy check German expansion.

### **Analytical incorrectness**

. . . Peace in these regions [Europe and Northeast Asia], according to the current conventional wisdom, is of vital importance to the United States for both economic and security reasons. A major war in either area would undermine American economic prosperity. Given the high levels of economic interdependence among the world's wealthiest powers, even if the United States managed to stay out of the fighting, a great-power war would badly damage America's economy as well as those of the warring states. Since the United States invariably gets dragged into distant great power wars, moreover, Americans are deluding themselves if they think they can sit out a major conflict in either Europe or Northeast Asia. To avoid having large numbers of Americans die down the road, therefore, the United States should maintain forces in those regions and preserve the peace, now and for the foreseeable future.

This conventional wisdom is seriously flawed. There is indeed little doubt that peace in Europe and Northeast Asia is a desirable goal for the United States. The key issue, however, is whether peace is important enough to justify putting U.S. troops in harm's way, which is the risk the United States runs if it stations forces in those regions indefinitely. In fact, although peace in these two wealthy regions is an important U.S. interest, it is not a vital one. The rationale for thinking otherwise is unconvincing and receives little support from the historical record.

Consider the claim that a war in Europe or Northeast Asia would undermine American prosperity, which is generally based on assertion, not analysis. The only study that I know of on the subject, by political scientists Eugene Gholz and Daryl Press, contradicts that claim. It concludes that "the primary effect of overseas wars on the economies of neutral countries is to redistribute wealth from belligerents to noncombatants, enriching neutrals rather than impoverishing them." In essence, in the event of an Asian or a European war the United States would not only probably become more prosperous in absolute terms, it would also gain relative power over the warring states. This is what happened to the United States when it was neutral for much of World War I: after some initial problems, the American economy flourished, while the economies of the European great powers were badly damaged. There is little reason to think that a major war in Europe or Northeast Asia today would seriously damage the U.S. economy, since, as Gholz and Press note, the U.S. economy is "roughly as vulnerable to a major great power war in Asia as it was to World War I, but it is only half as vulnerable today to disruptions in Europe as it was early in the 20th Century."

Even if this analysis is wrong, however, and a major war in Europe or Northeast Asia would make Americans less prosperous, the United States would still be unlikely to fight just



to ensure continued economic prosperity. Two prominent cases in recent times support this point. The United States did not use, or even seriously consider using, military force against any of the members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries during the oil crisis of the mid-1970s, even though OPEC's actions at the time undermined American prosperity. Furthermore, in the fall of 1990, the administration of President George H.W. Bush briefly tried to justify the impending Persian Gulf War on the grounds that Iraq's invasion of Kuwait had to be reversed because it threatened American jobs. This argument was heavily criticized and quickly abandoned. If the United States was unwilling to fight a war against weak oil-producing states for the sake of economic prosperity, it is hard to imagine it engaging in a great-power war for the same purpose.

The claim that the United States invariably gets drawn into great-power wars in Europe is also not persuasive. Both the United Kingdom and the United States have traditionally been offshore balancers who have been pulled into great-power conflicts only when there has been a potential regional hegemon that other parties could not contain by themselves. For example, both the United Kingdom and the United States were content to sit out the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5), because in neither case did the outcome threaten to create a hegemonic power. Moreover, the United States would not have entered World War I or World War II had the European powers been able to contain Germany by themselves. It was only because Germany threatened to overrun Europe in early 1917 and again in mid-1940 that the United States accepted a continental commitment.

One might counter that if the United States stays put in Europe and Northeast Asia, there will be no great-power war in the first place and thus no danger that Americans might have to suffer its horrible costs. But although a U.S. military presence may make war less likely, it cannot guarantee that conflict will not break out. If the U.S. military stays put in Northeast Asia, for example, it could plausibly end up in a war with China over Taiwan. If a great-power war does occur, moreover, this time the United States will be involved from the start, which does not make good strategic sense. It would be best for the United States either to avoid the fighting entirely or, if it has to join in, to do so later rather than earlier. That way, the United States would pay a much smaller price than the states fighting from start to finish and would be well positioned at the war's end to win the peace and shape the postwar world to its advantage.

... [T]he current U.S. military commitments to Europe and Northeast Asia are hardly set in stone—as America's allies in those regions understand all too well. The powerful structural imperatives of the international system, in fact, will probably force the United States to abandon its policy of constructive engagement in the near future and bring its troops home if there is no immediate threat for them to counter. But states occasionally ignore signals from the anarchic world in which they operate, choosing instead to pursue strategies that contradict straightforward balance-of-power logic. The United States is a good candidate for behaving in that way, because American political culture is deeply liberal and correspondingly hostile to realist ideas. It would be a grave mistake, however, for the country to turn its back on the realist principles that have served it well since its founding.

# European Union security and defense policy

## Response to unipolarity?

*Barry R. Posen*

From: *Security Studies* 15, no. 2 (June 2006): 149–86.

Since 1999 the European Union (EU) has proceeded at a steady pace to develop an autonomous capability to act militarily. This is a puzzle. With the collapse first of Soviet and then Russian power, Europeans acknowledge that they are safe from the threat of traditional attacks. For additional insurance, NATO, along with the U.S. commitment to European defense it carries with it, persists and indeed has found new missions to keep it occupied, especially the pacification of the politically unstable regions on Europe's periphery. The EU's institutional history is largely as an organization to improve European economies and (originally) to so integrate European heavy industry that the development of national war economies would prove difficult for any future aspirants to continental hegemony. Europe would not appear to need another military security provider, and the EU would seem an improbable candidate for such a project.

The European Union has improved its ability to act autonomously in security matters since 1999. "There is a political tide running and there is a sense that Europe's security and defence policy is suddenly beginning to happen," declares Nick Witney, the British chief of the new European Defence Agency.<sup>1</sup> As the Council of the European Union's Secretary General and High Representative for Foreign Policy, Javier Solana is the civilian figure in charge of coordinating EU foreign policy. Mr. Solana has, for the first time, coaxed European Union member states into publishing a security strategy document, "A Secure Europe in a Better World."<sup>2</sup> Political and military organizations have been created both to organize and to manage EU military operations. The EU has taken over peacekeeping in Bosnia Herzegovina (Operation Althea) after having conducted several smaller missions in Africa and the Balkans. Finally, at the national level, but coordinated on a Europe-wide basis, defense procurement programs have been launched to overcome key lacunae that in the past have limited Europe's ability to act militarily. As a potential security player in its neighborhood, the European Union is a vastly more capable actor than it was when its predecessor, the European Community (EC), could do essentially nothing militarily to influence the wars following the collapse of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. Moreover, neither the rejection of the European constitution in France and the Netherlands nor the bitter intra-European squabbles associated with the 2003 Iraq War have prevented further progress.

Why did the European Union decide to get into the security business? This article will offer one explanation—the very great power of the United States and all its implications for transatlantic relations and global politics. This is a structural realist explanation. I do not argue that the EU is balancing against a perceived imminent existential threat from the

United States; instead, I argue that the EU is preparing itself to manage autonomously security problems on Europe's periphery and to have a voice in the settlement of more distant security issues, should they prove of interest. It is doing so because Europeans do not trust the United States to always be there to address these problems and because many Europeans do not like the way the United States addresses these problems. They want another option, and they realize that military power is necessary to have such an option. The EU is balancing U.S. power, regardless of the relatively low European perception of an actual direct and imminent threat emanating from the United States . . .

### **Structural realism and unipolarity—tenets of realism**

Quietly and cautiously, Europeans appear to be balancing U.S. power. The theory of structural realism predicts this. Structural realism depicts the world as an anarchy—a domain without a sovereign. In that domain, states must look to themselves to survive. Because no sovereign can prevent states from doing what they are able in international politics, war is possible. The key to survival in war is military power—generated either internally or through alliances, and usually both. States care very much about their relative power position because power is the key to survival—both in a physical sense and in the political sense of the continued exercise of sovereignty. Power is also the key to influence in the system. It enables defense and offense, deterrence and coercion. States therefore try to grow their power when they believe they can do so without too much risk. They try especially hard to preserve the power they have. Because war is a competition, power is relative.

A state's power position can deteriorate due to another power's domestic or foreign success. Europe's security improved with the collapse of the Soviet Union, a U.S. success, but the U.S. power position improved even more. Europe is collectively much stronger relative to Russia now than it was; it is weaker relative to the United States than it was. When another power increases its capacities through either internal or external efforts, others have incentives to look to their own position. States behave this way not because they do understand the intentions of other states but because they do not.<sup>3</sup> Anarchy permits exploitation of the weak by the strong, making international politics a competitive realm. Thus states do not wish to be weak relative to others nor do they wish to depend on them.<sup>4</sup> If one state improves its relative power position—by vanquishing an old enemy, finding new allies, building more military power, achieving and demonstrating qualitative improvements in its military capacity, purposefully improving its ability to generate military capability, or endeavoring to dominate critical strategic geography or resources abroad—others will likely take note and respond. They find their own allies, mobilize their own capabilities, and emulate the successful competitive practices of other powerful states, including military and diplomatic practices.<sup>5</sup> This is balancing behavior in the structural realist variant of balance of power theory. Structural realism predicts both a general pattern of competitive behavior that ultimately leads to balances and deliberate balancing against particular powers, usually the most powerful states in the system. Both constitute balancing, and elements of both types of balancing are present in post-Cold War Europe. Structural realism does not predict all powers will behave this way all the time; however, those who do are more likely to thrive, and those who do not are likely to suffer . . .

***The what of ESDP?***

Though the EU has been interested in Foreign and Security Policy since its inception, most substantive progress has happened since late 1998. Progress has been rapid. In 2002 one careful ESDP study reported that “. . . today the EU is a net exporter of security. The Union is well placed to link a wide palette of economic, diplomatic and military means in the fight against multifaceted threats and challenges. . . . The EU has the potential to become a global force in conflict prevention and crisis management.”<sup>6</sup> Some analysts minimize the EU’s efforts thus far, as well as its plans, in an effort to demonstrate that experiences with U.S. power have not motivated Europeans to balance.<sup>7</sup> Although they are correct to argue that the magnitude of Europe’s efforts do not suggest fear of imminent war with the United States, they do underestimate both the quantity and quality of what has occurred and what is underway.

It was the accord achieved by Britain and France at their St. Malo Defense Ministers meetings in late 1998 that launched ESDP. The EU’s military effort is centered on the Petersberg tasks, “humanitarian and rescue tasks, peace-keeping tasks and tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peace-making” as strategic objectives. These were first incorporated into the Amsterdam Treaty of European Union in 1997, a principal purpose of which had been to “equip the Union better for its role in international politics.”<sup>8</sup> St. Malo and what came after arose from frustration that the Amsterdam Treaty had not fully succeeded. The Kosovo crisis and war finally convinced Europeans that more needed to be done.<sup>9</sup> As noted above, Germany led in 1999 the systematic EU consideration of what would be necessary to provide these capabilities.

The EU moved quickly to create both decision making and operational capabilities. The Political and Security Committee, a council of senior European diplomats stationed in Brussels, meets regularly to discuss security issues that might be of concern to Europe; the Military Committee is a council of European Chiefs of Defense Staff, with a chairman chosen from among them who resides in Brussels; the Military Staff is a small group of officers drawn from across Europe who permanently support the Military Committee and provide military advice to EU decision makers.<sup>10</sup>

The Helsinki Force Goal—the European Union’s first detailed capability objective adopted in December 1999 at the European Council Meeting in Helsinki—called for the EU to have the ability to deploy a “Rapid Reaction” force of 60,000 for a range of peacekeeping and peacemaking tasks within six months of a decision to do so and to sustain the mission for a year.<sup>11</sup> Most of the appropriate forces have since been identified, and the EU has declared the force ready for some of its designated missions, though not the most demanding ones.<sup>12</sup> Qualitative lacunae have also been identified, and some steps have been taken to rectify them, though all objectives have not been met.<sup>13</sup> Within roughly ten years, I estimate, the EU will collectively possess many, though not all, of the assets that were missing in the 1990s. This estimate is based on the planned acquisition pace of the key military assets that would permit the Europeans to conduct distant operations autonomously from NATO or the United States. Most of these are national or multi-national programs. Significant deliveries of the A400 strategic airlift aircraft are planned for 2009–2012.<sup>14</sup> Skynet 5, a sophisticated military satellite communications system that will mainly serve the United Kingdom, is expected to be fully operational by 2008.<sup>15</sup> The first test model of the Galileo navigation satellite, an EU program whose purpose is to develop an autonomous capability that mirrors that of the U.S. GPS satellites, was launched at the end of 2005.<sup>16</sup> Though European Union space activities formally reside in the economic “pillar” of the European Union structure,

efforts were begun in late 2004 to assure that "security and defence aspects are taken into account in the European space programme . . ." <sup>17</sup> Several European satellite reconnaissance programs should yield usable assets over the next few years; these are launched and operated by single European states or small groups of European states. <sup>18</sup> Britain plans to build two medium-sized aircraft carriers by 2015, both capable of significant sustained operations of attack aircraft. (These ships are much more capable power projection assets than the vessels they will replace.) France already has one such carrier and intends to build a second, perhaps on the British pattern. <sup>19</sup>

Out of deference to NATO, the EU denied itself the operational staff needed to command this force independently and agreed to depend mainly on NATO-SHAPE for the necessary resources to both plan and command any serious stabilization operation. NATO was unable to work out suitable methods for cooperation until political issues associated with Turkey and Greece were ameliorated. Since early 2003, the EU and NATO have made considerable progress in developing the modalities of EU-NATO cooperation. Nevertheless, France, Germany, Belgium, and Luxembourg remained dissatisfied with this dependence and set out to find a second way to run an EU operation. After much controversy, a decision was made both to formalize and strengthen an EU military planning cell at NATO and to augment the EU military staff with what has come to be known as the "Civil-Military Planning Cell" rather than set up a new EU command organization as these four states had originally suggested. <sup>20</sup> The augmented EU military staff would coordinate the delegation of operational authority for EU missions to the national operational headquarters that have been developed in Britain, France, Germany, and Italy since the mid-1990s; these headquarters have been pledged to the EU in the event of a collective decision to launch a peace enforcement operation. <sup>21</sup> The option to use these headquarters to plan and command an EU-led stabilization operation, without access to NATO-SHAPE assets, was prefigured in the British-French St. Malo communiqué in December 1998.

Against the predictions of many observers, progress continued after the acrimonious transatlantic and intra-European debates associated with the 2003 Iraq War. The European Union Military Staff was strengthened, as noted above. The EU has assumed responsibility for the Bosnia stabilization mission. The EU has recently decided to establish highly ready battle groups of battalion size, capable of deployment in a matter of days. An EU armaments directorate, the European Defence Agency (EDA), has been set up with the purpose of coordinating the defense spending of the member states. <sup>22</sup> The failure of the European constitutional referenda in France and the Netherlands in 2005 also seems not to have slowed progress. At the end of 2005, the EDA engineered an agreement, albeit a loose agreement in the form of a "Code of Conduct," to open the defense procurement market across Europe to competition, from which it had formerly been protected by EU rules. <sup>23</sup> Also in late 2005, the European Union conducted its first ever command exercise, designed to practice an autonomous peacekeeping operation using EU crisis management structures, a European operational headquarters (in this case the French national operational headquarters), and a European field headquarters. <sup>24</sup>

### ***The hegemon's coding***

U.S. officials from both the Clinton and Bush administrations have viewed ESDP with suspicion. <sup>25</sup> A recent, largely pro-ESDP study by the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Strategic and International Studies observes that the United States sometimes appears to be of two minds with regard to the EU's European Security and Defense Policy. "It applauds

steps taken to strengthen . . . military forces but in the next breath worries about Europeans taking independent action that could weaken . . . NATO . . . or run counter to U.S. security interests.”<sup>26</sup> A hegemon will likely be jealous of its power and will be particularly attuned to developments that might improve the power position of others.<sup>27</sup> Strobe Talbot, then deputy secretary of state, did not “want to see a European security and defence identity that come into being first within NATO but then grows out of NATO and finally grows away from NATO.”<sup>28</sup> In his very first meeting with Vice President Richard Cheney, Blair was questioned on the initiative he had launched at St. Malo. Cheney accused Britain of weakening NATO.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the Pentagon states explicitly that the purpose of NATO cooperation with the EU, through a set of procedures known as “Berlin Plus,” is “to prevent the creation of an EU counterpart to Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) and a separate ‘EU’ army . . .”<sup>30</sup> Starting in spring 2003, efforts by France, Germany, Belgium, and Luxembourg to set up a nucleus of a standing operational headquarters that might plan and run EU military operations were met with total opposition by the United States. U.S. Ambassador Nick Burns called it the “most serious threat to the future of NATO.”<sup>31</sup> The relationship between ESDP institutions and NATO remains fraught with “. . . mistrust, unhealthy competition, and severe information sharing blockages.”<sup>32</sup>

### **Past patterns and future problems**

This article began with a puzzle. Europe, one of the best defended and safest regions of the world, has produced parallel to NATO a second multi-state, political-military organization for the generation of military power, ESDP. I have argued that enough substantive activity has occurred to warrant the characterization of “puzzle.” Students of ESDP typically offer rich, multi-causal explanations for what has occurred. I have taken a different tack, mobilizing a general theory to explain this development. I argued at the outset that a family of liberal theories does not explain this outcome. One realist theory, balance of threat theory, also offers an unsatisfactory explanation. Structural realism offers a better understanding. States do respond to concentrated military power by trying to build their own power, regardless of their ideological affinity with the greatest power and regardless of any strong consensus about the threat that this power poses.

This article adopts the language of theory testing for purposes of exposition, but the main purpose is to develop an understanding of the forces acting on Europe. From structural realism . . . , I have made some predictions about what we ought to see in this case . . . These predictions are broadly confirmed. The most powerful European states organize this effort. Each stresses different motives for its leadership or participation, but the different motives are captured by structural realism. The United Kingdom and Italy are mainly motivated by a desire to reduce their dependence on the United States and increase their influence over it; secondarily, they seek to achieve independent global influence for the European Union. France shares these interests but seems more strongly motivated by a desire to balance U.S. power and to achieve global influence for the European Union. Germany’s motives seem to lie somewhere in between. The different motives converge, however, into support for the same project, ESDP. U.K. support is particularly striking, insofar as it has typically expressed the strongest possible support for NATO and has demonstrated through its actions the strongest fealty to the United States. The project annoys the United States because, however diplomatically deferential the project is to the United States and NATO, it challenges U.S. hegemony. The United Kingdom continues to support it in any case, and without this support, ESDP would be in some trouble.



Though the Europeans are, in my view, balancing U.S. power, we must concede they are not balancing very intensively. European members of NATO have not abandoned that alliance; instead, they have simply supported the construction of a parallel structure and indeed regularly support improved cooperation between NATO and ESDP. As noted earlier, collective European defense spending is a bit less than half that of the United States, and crucial spending on military research and development and procurement is roughly one third that of the United States. In the first instance, the European Union is rightly trying to increase the efficiency of the existing military effort, which is large by any standard but that of the United States; it may ultimately need to increase the magnitude of the effort as well, even to achieve its circumscribed purposes.

### ***The consequences of ESDP for transatlantic relations***

ESDP owes its recent progress to European experience with the great power of the United States in the post-Cold War world. The key players in ESDP, some of their often ambiguously stated motives, the precipitating events, the nature of the capabilities sought, and even the reactions of the United States suggest that this project is spurred by U.S. power. If this is the main explanation for ESDP's rapid evolution and if we believe that unipolarity is likely to persist for some time, we should then expect the Europeans to continue the project. ESDP has provided Europe with a limited capability, and this capability seems likely to grow over the next decade. Moreover, some Europeans want to use it.

If ESDP missions are successful, the project may attract more public and elite support. If so, the budgetary resources devoted to Europe's security project may even increase.

If these predictions are correct, a successful ESDP is likely to complicate U.S.–EU relations in three ways. First, because of its peculiar relations with NATO, ESDP gives Europeans a way to encourage the United States to be more interested in Europe's special security concerns than would otherwise be the case. Europeans have strong interests in peace and order on Europe's periphery, including the suppression of civil conflict.<sup>33</sup> NATO has taken on these missions, but it has also taken on missions farther afield in order to satisfy the United States. All three post-Cold War U.S. presidents have shown a strong interest in preserving NATO's primacy on the continent. If Europeans were to propose to NATO a mission that they thought was important but that the United States thought unimportant in its own terms, the United States would now have a second reason to approve the mission—to keep it out of the EU's hands and to avoid the prestige loss associated with a success. The EU will have a certain agenda-setting power in NATO. The United States is not going to like this. Moreover, Europeans who have more capability to contribute will expect a bigger say in the implementation of any agreed projects.

Second, the maturation of the ESDP will produce Europeans who are increasingly convinced that if they had to do so, they could provide for their own security. This is not a prediction of an EU ready and eager to compete with the United States. It is a prediction of an EU ready to look after itself. This will not happen soon, but given the planned pace of European capabilities improvements, a more militarily autonomous Europe will appear viable in roughly a decade. As consciousness of this fact grows, Europeans will probably speak to the United States inside and outside NATO with greater expectation that their views will be taken seriously.<sup>34</sup> The United States will have decisions to make about how it wants to conduct its foreign policy and, in particular, how much it cares about Western Europe relative to its other international projects. Sir Rodric Braithwaite captured the logic of this new situation perfectly. "A junior partner who is taken for granted is a junior partner with no

influence. In dealing with the Americans we need to follow the basic principle of negotiation: you must always make it clear that you will, if necessary, walk away from the table.”<sup>35</sup> A functioning ESDP means that the Europeans can.

Third, insofar as U.S. officials already recognize that ESDP is and will be a complicating factor for them, they have decisions to make about the U.S. attitude toward the project. On the whole, U.S. officials have supported the project—but only with the understanding that it will provide Europe with no truly autonomous capabilities. When it appears otherwise, they oppose, sometimes artfully and sometimes clumsily. The more the United States opposes the project, the more suspicious many Europeans become about the ultimate rewards of cooperation with the United States in the context of NATO. Overt U.S. opposition may help produce the very capacities that the United States opposes. Given U.S. power, along with consciousness of its power, it is not obvious that the United States will find a subtle way to deal with the EU’s defense efforts. This will add more friction to the transatlantic relationship.

The European defense project was not pursued with much vigor until after the end of the Cold War. Most progress is comparatively recent. Though many factors have contributed to this recent progress, specific questions posed by the unusually preponderant U.S. power position appear particularly important. Viewed in this light, ESDP is a form of balancing behavior, albeit still a weak form. Should ESDP progress, as it well might given the causes at work, it seems likely that Europe will prove a less docile ally of the United States in a decade or two.

## Notes

- 1 Daniel Dombey and Eric Jansson, “The Mission Beginning today in Bosnia,” *Financial Times*, 2 December 2004.
- 2 European Council, European Union, *A Secure Europe in a Better World, European Security Strategy* (Brussels, 12 December 2003), <http://www.iss-EU.org/solana/solanae.pdf>.
- 3 This is Kenneth Waltz’s central prediction. Speaking of the anarchical condition of international politics, he observes, “A self-help system is one in which those who do not help themselves, or who do so less effectively than others, will fail to prosper, will lay themselves open to dangers, will suffer. Fear of such unwanted consequences stimulates states to behave in ways that tend toward the creation of balances of power.” See Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 118. See also John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 29–54.
- 4 Waltz, *Theory*, 105–07.
- 5 Waltz, *Theory*, 118, 124, 127–28.
- 6 Hans-Christian Hagman, *European Crisis Management and Defence: The Search for Capabilities*, Adelphi Paper 353, (London: Oxford University Press for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2002), 101.
- 7 See Stephen Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, “Hard Times for Soft Balancing,” *International Security* 30, no. 1 (Summer 2005), 91–93. Of the EU’s 60,000 person rapid reaction force, they wonder, “When this force will be able to operate independently from U.S. transport, communications, and other forms of logistical support remains unclear” (*ibid.*, 92). It is unclear, but not impossible to estimate, as I show below. The direction of European efforts is clear: they want an autonomous capacity, and they are working steadily toward that end. The authors are correct to point out that the United States vastly outspends the Europeans on military R&D, so the technological quality of the EU force is destined to lag that of the United States. John Owen, “Transnational Liberalism and U.S. Primacy,” *International Security* 26, no. 3 (Winter 2001/2002), 129–32, 141–43, also dismisses European defense efforts as essentially trivial, and unmotivated by U.S. power.
- 8 The disintegration of Yugoslavia was a precipitating event. The original Treaty of European Union agreed in Maastricht in 1992 called for a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), but provided no effective mechanisms to achieve it. The Amsterdam Treaty, among other things, created the Office of the High Representative for CFSP, the post now held by Javier Solana. It also

- pointed to "the progressive framing of a common defence policy." Nevertheless, the Amsterdam Treaty counted on the Western European Union to be the institutional vehicle for European security policy. See "The Amsterdam Treaty: a Comprehensive Guide, An effective and coherent external policy," <http://europa.EU.int/scadplus/leg/en/lvb/a19000.htm>. The Treaty of Nice, 2000, more or less abandoned reliance on the WEU and took the security project into the EU.
- 9 "The main motivation of the European Union to improve its capabilities in the field of crisis management lies in the frustrating experiences in the nineties during the Yugoslav crisis." Marc-Andre Ryter, *Managing Contemporary Crises: A Challenge for the European Union*, Department of Strategic and Defence Studies, series 2, no. 18 (National Defence College, Helsinki, 2002), 1, 7–10.
- 10 The creation of these three institutions was recommended at the June 1999 European Council meeting in Cologne. The European Council, "European Council Declaration on Strengthening the Common European Policy on Security and Defence," Presidency Conclusions, Annexes to the Presidency Conclusions (Cologne European Council, 3–4 June 1999), Annex III, sec. 1–5, [http://europa.EU.int/council/off/conclu/june99/annexe\\_en.htm#a3](http://europa.EU.int/council/off/conclu/june99/annexe_en.htm#a3). The three organizations were officially set up at the Nice European Council Meeting in December 2000.
- 11 "To develop European capabilities, Member States have set themselves the headline goal: by the year 2003, cooperating together voluntarily, they will be able to deploy rapidly and then sustain forces capable of the full range of Petersberg tasks as set out in the Amsterdam Treaty, including the most demanding, in operations up to corps level (up to 15 brigades or 50,000–60,000 persons). These forces should be militarily self-sustaining with the necessary command, control and intelligence capabilities, logistics, other combat support services and additionally, as appropriate, air and naval elements. Member States should be able to deploy in full at this level within 60 days, and within this to provide smaller rapid response elements available and deployable at very high readiness. They must be able to sustain such a deployment for at least one year. This will require an additional pool of deployable units (and supporting elements) at lower readiness to provide replacements for the initial forces." See The European Council, "Presidency Progress Report to the Helsinki European Council On Strengthening the Common European Policy on Security and Defence," Presidency Conclusions, Annexes to the Presidency Conclusions (Helsinki European Council, 10–11 December 1999), Annex 1 to Annex IV, [http://ue.EU.int/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/ACFA4C.htm](http://ue.EU.int/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/ACFA4C.htm).
- 12 For a comprehensive account and assessment of these EU initiatives, see Hans-Christian Hagman, *European Crisis Management and Defence: The Search for Capabilities*, Adelphi Paper 353 (London: Oxford University Press for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2002), esp. 28–29, 35–54.
- 13 Julian Lindley-French and Franco Algieri, A European Defence Strategy, The Vision Document of the Venusberg Group (Bertelsmann Foundation, May 2004). See also Council of the European Union, "Capability Improvement Chart 2004," [9419/04], 13 May 2004, <http://ue.EU.int/uedocs/cmsUpload/040517%20Capabilities%20Improvement%20Chart.pdf>.
- 14 S. Coniglio, "A400M, An-70, C-130J, C-17: How Do They Stand?" *Military Technology* 27, no. 7 (2003): 58.
- 15 C. Hoyle, "UK Concludes Skynet 5 deal", *Jane's Defence Weekly* 40, no. 17 (2003): 3. France has a similar system, Syracuse III, which was launched in autumn 2005 and accepted for service in December 2005. Alcatel Alenia Space, "The French Defense Procurement Agency Accepts the Syracuse 3 System," press release, 19 December 2005, [http://www.home.alcatel.com/vpr/vpr.nsf/va\\_TousByIDPERE/II2A](http://www.home.alcatel.com/vpr/vpr.nsf/va_TousByIDPERE/II2A); and "French Military communications satellite launch expected in September," *Agence France Presse*, 13 August 2005. It should be acknowledged that both Britain and France have had satellite communications systems in the past. These are improved models with greater global capability. Both have also been chosen as key components of NATO's satellite communications modernization effort.
- 16 European Space Agency, "First Galileo satellite on orbit to demonstrate key technologies," press release, 28 December 2005, [http://www.esa.int/esaCP/SEMSRO8A9HE\\_index\\_2.html](http://www.esa.int/esaCP/SEMSRO8A9HE_index_2.html); D. A. Divis, "Military role for Galileo emerges," *GPS World* 13, no. 5 (2002): 10, [www.globalsecurity.org](http://www.globalsecurity.org).
- 17 Council of the European Union, "Presidency Report on the ESDP," Presidency Conclusions, 10032/05 ANNEX (Brussels European Council, 13 June 2005), 21, <http://www.EU-oplysningen.dk/dokumenter/DER/16062005/rapporter/1003205/>.

- 18 WEU, "The New Challenges Facing European Intelligence—reply to the annual report of the Council," Document A/1775 (Assembly of the WEU, Paris, 4 June 2002), par. 81–84, 104. Helios IIA, a French optical satellite was launched on 18 December 2004 and is now producing imagery. Spain and Belgium are partners. A 4 microsatellite experimental constellation of electronic intelligence collectors was piggy-backed on the same launch and is undergoing testing. Arianespace, "Arianespace Flight 165 successfully orbits the Helios IIA observation spacecraft," press release, 18 December 2004, [http://www.arianespace.com/site/news/releases/presrel04\\_12\\_18.html](http://www.arianespace.com/site/news/releases/presrel04_12_18.html).
- 19 Richard Scott, "Design for Life," *Jane's Defence Weekly* 42, no. 37 (2005): 72–82.
- 20 John Chalmers, "UK clinches EU defence deal," *Reuters*, 11 December 2003, [www.reuters.co.uk](http://www.reuters.co.uk); and "EU agrees to create military planning cell next year," *AFP*, 12 December 2003, <http://uk.news.yahoo.com/031212/323/egx37.html>.
- 21 Stephen Castle, "Italy Brokers Deal to End EU Defence Rift," *The Independent*, 3 October 2003, (Financial Times Information, Global News Wire-Europe Intelligence Wire, 2003), reports an Italian proposal for a rotating team of EU planners to be associated with the existing national operational headquarters in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy and Greece.
- 22 For an overview of current EU military initiatives, see Council of the European Union, "Presidency Report on the ESDP," 17 December 2004, <http://ue.EU.int/uedocs/cmsUpload/ESDP%20Presidency%20Report%2017.12.04.pdf>; and Council of the European Union, "Military Capabilities Commitment Conference," 22 November 2004, [http://ue.EU.int/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressData/en/misc/82761.pdf](http://ue.EU.int/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/misc/82761.pdf).
- 23 European Defence Agency, "EU Governments Agree Voluntary Code for Cross-Border Competition in Defence Equipment Market," press release, 21 November 2005, [http://ue.EU.int/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressData/en/misc/87058.pdf](http://ue.EU.int/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/misc/87058.pdf).
- 24 Council of the European Union, "EU Military exercise (MILEX 05)," press release, 18 November 2005, [http://ue.EU.int/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressData/en/misc/87034.pdf](http://ue.EU.int/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/misc/87034.pdf).
- 25 "The ESDP has been seen as controversial, and as posing a threat to NATO and U.S. influence in Europe." Hagman, *European Crisis Management and Defence*, 55–59, esp. 56. See also Hans-Christian Hagman, *European Crisis Management and Defence: The Search for Capabilities*, Adelphi Paper 353 (London: Oxford University Press for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2002), esp. 28–29, 35–54. He notes that the United States is at best ambivalent about ESDP. The United States has been attracted by the possibility that ESDP could produce more useful European military capabilities, especially for peacekeeping missions in which the United States might not wish to tie down its forces, but has been concerned that "... a European specific, EU-affiliated set of defense bodies could compete with or encroach upon NATO's area of jurisdiction" (Brenner, "The CFSP Factor," 192).
- 26 Michele A. Flournoy, "European Defense Integration: Bridging the Gap between Strategy and Capabilities," (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 2005), 25. "What creates tension across the Atlantic, however, is the question of whether a stronger European pillar will ultimately become a more autonomous European pillar that turns way from NATO to focus on the EU as Europe's primary vehicle for collective security and defense. This is what the United States fears. It is also what a few EU countries advocate."
- 27 Apparently such concerns extend to legislative bodies. Senator William Roth sponsored a resolution in the U.S. Senate on 9 November 1999 reminding Europeans that NATO should remain the primary institution for European security and that it should have the right of first refusal for all military tasks in Europe. It passed unanimously. See "Europe: The EU turns its attention from ploughshares to swords," *The Economist*, 20 November 1999, 51.
- 28 Norton-Taylor, "On the defensive," observes that then deputy secretary of state Strobe Talbott "wanted to have his cake and eat it." Talbott favored "... a strong, integrated, self-confident and militarily capable Europe" but did not want it to be independent of the United States in security matters. Similarly, then U.S. ambassador to NATO, Alexander Vershbow, developed the ability to support and critique ESDP in the same speech to a high art. Translated into plain English, his message was simple. So long as ESDP produced real capabilities identified by NATO, coordinated closely with NATO as an institution, and consulted closely with non-EU European NATO member states, it would be a great thing for NATO and the United States to support it. If the EU focused on capacities for autonomous action, then ESDP would be a bad and divisive thing. "—If ESDP is mostly about European construction, then it will focus more on institution-building than on building new capabilities, and there will be a tendency to oppose the 'interference' of

NATO and to minimize the participation of non-EU Allies. The danger here is that, if autonomy becomes an end in itself, ESDP will be an ineffective tool for managing crises and transatlantic tensions will increase." See Alexander Vershbow, "European Defense: European and American Perceptions," (speech, Transatlantic Forum, Paris, 18 May 2000), [www.usembassy.it/file2000\\_05/alia.a0051907.htm](http://www.usembassy.it/file2000_05/alia.a0051907.htm).

- 29 Philip Stephens, *Tony Blair, The Making of a World Leader* (London: Viking Penguin, 2004), 190. Blair then, for all intents and purposes, sought and secured President Bush's approval of the ESDP project, which he "tentatively" provided (*ibid.*, 193).
- 30 Office of the Secretary of Defense, Department of Defense, *Allied Contributions to the Common Defense* (Washington, DC, 2002), chap. II, 5.
- 31 Stephen Castle, "NATO calms U.S. fears of European defence HQ," *The Independent*, 21 October 2003, <http://news.independent.co.uk>.
- 32 Flournoy, *European Defense Integration*, 71.
- 33 "Member States' strong commitment to give the enlarged European Union the tools to make a major contribution to *security and stability in a ring of well governed countries around Europe* and in the world is stronger than ever. The EU has the civilian and military framework needed to face the multifaceted nature of these new threats." European Council, European Union, "Headline Goal 2010," 6309/6/04 (Brussels, 17–18 June 2004), par. 1 (my italics). <http://ue.EU.int/uedocs/cmsUpload/2010%20Headline%20Goal.pdf>.
- 34 "... Conditions that are enabling of concerted policies by EU members states are equally conditions that permit the EU to chart a course that may diverge from that of the U.S.—even if there is scant chance that CFSP will take shape as an avowed counterweight to the U.S." Brenner, "The CFSP Factor," 194.
- 35 Sir Rodric Braithwaite, "End of the Affair," *Prospect*, May 2003, [www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/ArticleView.asp?P\\_Article=11914](http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/ArticleView.asp?P_Article=11914).

# Still not pushing back

## Why the European Union is not balancing the United States

*Jolyon Howorth and Anand Menon*

From: *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, no. 5 (October 2009): 727–44.

The increasing visibility of European Union (EU) security policy over recent years has generated a number of lively exchanges concerning its development, nature, and implications for both Europe and international politics more generally.<sup>1</sup> Prominent amongst these is the debate over whether the EU, via the medium of its European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), is in the process of “soft balancing” against the United States. It is a dispute pitting those who see ESDP as a rational attempt to respond to U.S. preponderance against those who question the intellectual value of the soft balancing concept, and/or its applicability to this particular case . . .

Many of those who argue that states are beginning to “push back” against American preeminence have used ESDP as an illustrative case. We argue, however, that they have fundamentally misinterpreted it. For one thing, their approach is both theoretically and methodologically flawed. More significantly, careful empirical analysis of a kind too infrequently undertaken reveals the shortcomings of their analysis. The EU’s nascent security and defense policies simply do not represent the kind of balancing response to U.S. primacy postulated by the soft balancers. Moreover, they could not. An important distinction must be made between the preferences of individual national capitals and the actions of the EU. Even if one or two powerful member states might be tempted by balancing, the very nature of the EU would preclude this simply being adopted as a strategy for ESDP. International intergovernmental institutions like the EU are quite inappropriate vehicles for the kinds of balancing behavior that some (wrongly) claim it to be engaged in . . .

### **Methodological flaws and theoretical ambiguities**

While advancing several compelling arguments as to why the EU might be attempting to “push back” against the United States, the soft-balancing literature is flawed in several important respects. Critics have pointed to the dangers inherent in adopting too permissive a definition of balancing, arguing that what is often referred to as soft balancing is, in reality, nothing more than “standard diplomatic bargaining” relabelled because “real balancing . . . was cleared off the agenda . . . with the end of the Cold War” (Lieber and Alexander 2005). Such “conceptual stretching” (Sartori 1970) renders “balancing” indistinguishable from “normal diplomatic friction” (Brooks and Wohlforth 2005). The very notion of soft balancing, then, is potentially so elastic as to be devoid of analytical bite.

Conceptual ambiguities aside, some soft balancing accounts fail to specify key causal relationships sufficiently clearly (an obvious and laudable exception being Posen [2006]).



Thus, Seth Jones provides two explanations for enhanced security cooperation between European states. On the one hand, this is explicable in terms of U.S. power. Thus, “aggregating power and building multilateral forces increases the autonomy of weaker states and decreases the likelihood that the dominant power will impose its will on them in areas of strategic importance” (Jones 2007). On the other, balancing is portrayed as motivated by a desire to “bind” a unified Germany to its European partners (Jones 2007). According to this analysis, European security cooperation is “inversely correlated with American power in Europe,” hence the less involved the United States is in European security affairs, the more the Europeans will cooperate amongst themselves (Jones 2007). European attempts to aggregate power are thus portrayed as both a response to and a cause of decreasing American involvement in European matters. Cause and effect are confused, and it thus becomes difficult to test the predictions of the theory. A further confusion relates to intentionality. Robert Art argues that

... [i]ncreases in a state’s power relative to other states have consequences for the balance of power among them irrespective of the state’s intentions. In a balance of power system, the consequences of behavior ultimately override the intentions behind the behaviour.

(Art 2005/2006)

To define soft balancing in this way, however, is to strip it of any theoretical purchase. Under such a definition, *any* action by *any* state which increases that state’s relative power vis-à-vis another can be defined as “balancing” (Brooks and Wohlforth 2005).

Later in the same piece, however, Art adopts a different approach:

“Balancing” refers to behavior designed to create a better range of outcomes for a state vis-à-vis another state or coalitions of states by adding to the power assets at its disposal in an attempt to offset or diminish the advantages enjoyed by that other state or coalition.

(Art [2005/2006], first emphasis added)

Others, such as Stephen Walt, have also stressed that soft balancing represents a “*conscious* coordination of diplomatic action in order to obtain outcomes contrary to U.S. preferences—outcomes that could not be gained if the balancers did not give each other some degree of mutual support” (Walt [2005], emphasis in original). Again, under this formulation, motive is crucial to any notion of soft balancing.

Yet while providing enhanced theoretical purchase, this approach itself raises fundamental methodological issues. Proponents of the soft-balancing thesis have frequently resorted—if only implicitly—to a functional approach in their analysis of ESDP, grounded in *ex post facto* attributions of motive based on observable outcomes (for a discussion, see Keohane [1984]). The claim that the EU is intent on soft balancing U.S. power is inferred either from supposedly increasing EU military capabilities (Art 2005/2006), or from ambitious statements of intent—notably from French President Jacques Chirac (Jones 2007).

Yet it is simply inappropriate to apply a method that infers motive from outcome in defense of a theory whose central claims concern these very motives. Indeed, the soft balancers go one step further, inferring intentions not from current but from predicted future outcomes. Thus, Posen contends that “the maturation of the ESDP will produce Europeans who are increasingly convinced that they could provide for their own security if they had to do so” (Posen 2004). Not one but two leaps of analytical faith—on the

processes of the past and the outcomes of the future—are therefore required to buy into an assessment of ESDP that risks being “not an explanation but an expectation” (Brooks and Wohlforth 2005).

Despite the proliferation of (on occasion contradictory) approaches to soft balancing, it is nevertheless possible to identify three core claims amenable to empirical testing. These relate to European motives, ESDP outcomes, and U.S. reactions.

First, given the centrality of intentionality to most accounts, we would expect clear evidence of a desire on the part of European states to balance against American power. If they are involved in soft balancing against the United States, their objective should be to limit American control over European security affairs and also possibly to exercise effective influence over U.S. policy in other parts of the world.

Yet we must be clear about whose preferences should be taken into account. ESDP is the *common* policy of twenty-seven EU member states. It does not replace or subvert the individual foreign and security policies of individual member states. Consequently, soft-balancing preferences on the part of a single member state in no way implicates either the EU as a whole or ESDP in such behavior. Even if one accepts the soft balancers’ claims regarding large-state domination of the EU, a clear balancing objective should be manifest on the part of, at the very least, the three largest member states.

Second, intent must be translated into clear policies reflecting this objective. In other words, one would expect not only “balancing motives” but also “balancing consequences” (Art 2005/2006). One aspect of this is that we could expect to see evidence of Europeans preparing themselves to “go it alone” (Posen 2006) when it comes to military policy and the projection of military power. Another is institutional: balancing ambitions would be implied by a more ambitious ESDP that would be a serious competitor to (American-dominated) NATO and challenge the latter for primacy in European security (Art 2004).

Third, balancing also implies an attempt to develop European military capabilities with the clear intention of allowing Europe to exert more influence over the United States and to project power internationally. Such forces “should do more than merely deliver presents to the United States; for example, they should provide the hope of some degree of genuine strategic autonomy” (Posen 2006). Increased capabilities imply less American influence over European security affairs, in that “an EU that can provide for its own security will not be dependent on the United States for it, and that alone will decrease U.S. influence over the EU” (Art 2005/2006). Increased EU military capabilities will also enhance Europe’s broader autonomy in that the “benefit of an EU force is that it provides European Union states with the ability to project power abroad *even if the United States objects*” (Jones [2007], emphasis in original). Both military and institutional autonomy are implied in this latter remark. The point here, however, is that, for the soft-balancing case to be convincing, the main driver of EU security policy has to be both the intention of and actions taken toward reducing U.S. influence over European affairs.

Finally, if the EU is genuinely engaged in balancing against the United States, we would expect some form of negative reaction from the latter. The inherent logic of the balance of power would suggest that an absence of American suspicion would provide compelling evidence of a lack of balancing behavior. After all, the condition of anarchy implies that “states are wise to be concerned about capability improvements and power increases by others,” and thus “[w]ho better to code the behavior of the EU than the state most obsessed with power relations” (Posen 2006).

## ESDP: the empirical evidence

How well, then, do the claims of the soft balancers stand up to empirical scrutiny in terms of European motives, ESDP outcomes, and U.S. reactions? As for a clear and concerted desire or intention on the part of at least the larger EU member states to “push back” against American power, the empirical evidence is mixed but unambiguous. Paul (2004) argues that some French rhetoric could be interpreted as conforming to a soft-balancing ideal (although it is significant that he draws only on evidence from two journalists). Yet even French policy, most frequently cited by the soft balancers as vindicating their central claims, fails to provide unequivocal evidence. The 2009 announcement by President Sarkozy of a full return to NATO’s integrated command structure has been widely interpreted in France as evidence of a new “alignment” on U.S. policy—although the motivation behind the decision remains shrouded in ambiguity (Bozo 2008).

While there is some room for debate about French intentions, there is virtually none where the UK is concerned. The UK has consistently supported closer partnership with the United States. Indeed, Tony Blair explicitly contrasted balancing strategies intended to lead to the emergence of “rival centres of power” with his own preference for “one polar power . . . which encompasses a strategic partnership between Europe and American and other countries too” (*Financial Times*, April 27, 2003). Posen himself accepts that this amounts to bandwagoning rather than balancing, but claims, nevertheless, that “Britain’s bandwagoning is strategic; it hopes to achieve influence on key policies in return for material support. Britain has supported ESDP in the hope of making Europe more powerful and more influential” (Posen 2006, 167). However, such claims overlook the fact that Blair’s support for ESDP at the much vaunted Saint-Malo summit of 1998 was primarily motivated by his fear that, unless Europe developed serious military capacity, the United States would gradually abandon NATO (Howorth 2000). Far from being motivated by a desire to reduce U.S. influence in Europe, therefore, UK policy was predicated on a desire to maintain it.

Posen is also clear that unipolarity should lead to “autonomy-seeking behavior,” which equates to “balancing behaviour” (Posen 2006). Preferences regarding the degree of autonomy that ESDP should enjoy from NATO are thus a good indicator of the strength of the desire to balance U.S. power. Here again, the French position has often conformed to such expectations—for some French officials, ESDP should develop into a truly autonomous European military capability able to carry out missions on the scale of the Kosovo intervention without assistance from NATO (Ministère de la Défense 1999). In contrast, senior British politicians have been anxious to underline their belief that NATO remains the “only game in town” for large-scale military missions, the “sole organization” for collective defense in Europe, and the institution of choice for carrying out “significant” crisis management operations (Hoon 2000). Once again, the British believed that ESDP could be used to counter the threat of the *retraction*, rather than the expansion, of American power. The intention in London was not merely to strengthen NATO (itself a negation of soft-balancing predictions), but to do so specifically to increase U.S. commitment to it (Gnesotto 2005; Howorth 2007).

Thus, while some French rhetoric could be interpreted as providing grist to the soft balancers’ mill, British preferences have been at odds with any conceivable notion of balancing. It is hard, therefore, to see how the latter can be reconciled with claims that the two states have, in concert, been engaged in leading a European attempt to “push back” against U.S. power. Moreover, it is generally UK rather than French preferences that have found expression in collective statements regarding the nature and purpose of ESDP.

Even the 1998 Franco-British Saint Malo Declaration defined the objective of EU defense efforts as being to contribute to “the vitality of a modernised Atlantic Alliance, which is the foundation of the collective defence of its members” (Rutten 2001). The European Security Strategy document of December 2003 goes even further, stating that:

The transatlantic relationship is irreplaceable. Acting together, the European Union and the United States can be a formidable force for good in the world. Our aim should be an effective and balanced partnership with the USA. This is an additional reason for the EU to build up further its capabilities and increase its coherence.

(Solana 2003)

Absent unambiguous “balancing motives” on the part of even the larger member states, it is perhaps not surprising that there is at best limited empirical evidence of “balancing outcomes.” In order for claims about the Union’s ambition to “push back” to be credible, we should be able to detect an attempt on its part to deploy enhanced military capabilities. The soft balancers have, after all, emphasized the influence that would be enjoyed over the United States by a “European Union that can act autonomously in its own region and that can provide for its own security” (Art 2005/2006).

Acting autonomously in the region, however, is one thing. Providing for the EU’s security is rather different. There is absolutely no evidence to support the latter—more ambitious—claim that the member states are planning to entrust the EU with collective or territorial defense. For the foreseeable future, the EU will play no role in the defense of the member states, and these latter will remain dependent for this on NATO, which remains the bedrock of territorial defense in Europe. Even the French President has consistently made it clear that, for the EU, collective defense is the fundamental job of NATO: “60 years after the founding of NATO [. . .] article 5 of the Washington Treaty remains the very essence of the Alliance. This has gained added meaning following the terrorist attacks of September 11” (Sarkozy and Merkel 2009).

Moreover, far from providing evidence of a determined intention to deploy significant autonomous military capabilities, the missions actually undertaken by the EU to date reveal something quite different. The member states have chosen to act through NATO even for tasks other than territorial defense. Two of the largest military missions launched by the EU to date—in Bosnia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia—have both been carried out under the so-called “Berlin plus” arrangements, in close collaboration with NATO.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, far from constraining the United States or limiting its ability to intervene unilaterally as the soft balancing thesis would suggest, one major objective of ESDP is precisely to relieve the U.S. army of regional crisis management responsibilities in Europe, allowing Washington to pursue its foreign policy objectives through better use of its military elsewhere in the world. This was recognized in the United States’s *Global Posture Review* of November 2004, which withdrew tens of thousands of troops from Europe to deploy them elsewhere in the world. Washington has thus benefited mightily from ESDP and its close links with NATO, enjoying a say—and, in the last resort, a veto—over significant European missions, while profiting from them to deploy troops elsewhere.

Finally, the focus of the soft-balancing literature has, as we have seen, been squarely on European *military* forces. Seth Jones (2007), in a book-length study of European attempts to gain greater autonomy from the United States via enhanced security cooperation, does not even mention the civilian aspects of ESDP. Yet for all the expectations on the part of the soft balancers (and numerous other observers) that ESDP would be a largely military

undertaking, only six of the twenty-two ESDP operations carried out to date have been military. The majority have consisted of everything from police training missions to deployments aimed at promoting security sector reform (ISIS Europe 2009). Once again, the empirical evidence fails to provide support for ambitious predictions regarding European military aspirations as the basis for an attempt to “push back.”

If EU operations to date provide no support to the soft balancing thesis, nor is there evidence that the EU member states are collectively engaged in serious efforts to enhance their ability to act autonomously. The soft balancers place great stress on the Helsinki Headline Goal (HHG) of December 1999, viewing it as indicative of a desire to create serious military capabilities (Art 2005/2006). The HHG had called for the provision of sixty thousand troops, one hundred ships, and four hundred aircraft, deployable within sixty days and sustainable for one year.

Certainly, member states have retained at least a rhetorical commitment to these goals. In the European Council’s “Declaration on Strengthening Capabilities” of December 11, 2008, aspirations even exceed the Helsinki objectives (Council of the European Union 2008). Yet in practice, the original HHG has been superseded by new thinking. The *Headline Goal 2010 (HG 2010)*, formally adopted at the European Council meeting of 17 June 2004 (Council of the European Union 2004), focused on “battlegroups”—units of 1,500 troops deployable within 15 days and sustainable in the field for up to 30 days with potential extension to 120 days (Lindstrom 2007). The former Head of the European Defence Agency commented wryly that, between Helsinki and the HG2010, “the goalposts were not so much moved as dismantled altogether” (Witney 2008). And even while declaring the battlegroups fully operational in January 2007, the EU member states have proved reluctant to deploy them, even when specifically requested for the Democratic Republic of Congo by the UN Secretary General in December 2008 (Menon 2009). The simple fact is that if “we are to imagine the [European rapid reaction force] as the vanguard of a counterweight to U.S. military power, then the United States can rest easy” (Lieber and Alexander 2005/2006).

A gulf has separated rhetoric from reality when it comes to the EU’s ambitions in terms of military capabilities. One key observer has characterized attempts to enhance these capabilities as a “failure” (Witney 2008). Funds for defense remain scarce—SIPRI reported that, in 2005, Europe was the only region in the world where military spending decreased—by some 1.7 percent (SIPRI 2006). As importantly, what money there is is often badly spent. Despite the cold war having ended almost two decades ago, European armed forces still own ten thousand main battle tanks and 2,500 combat aircraft (Witney 2008). And despite large manpower budgets—the twenty-seven member states had almost two million active service personnel on their books in 2006 (International Institute for Strategic Studies 2008)—only 30 percent of these can actually operate outside European territory because of either legal restrictions or inadequate training (Witney 2008).

The overwhelming majority of recent serious scholarship on ESDP has charted the extraordinary complexity of a process which has been obliged, from the outset, to synthesize the very different preferences of twenty-seven sovereign nation states. ESDP has always been governed by the unanimity rule. Whatever might be the preferences of individual member states in terms of missions, institutions, or capabilities, ESDP (which is the development the soft balancers are specifically concerned about) has always been and done what *all member states* can agree on (Giegerich 2006; Howorth 2007; Mérand 2008; Tardy 2009; Schwok and Mérand 2009; Meyer 2006). None of these scholars—whose work is largely ignored by the soft balancers—detects any evidence of either balancing motives or balancing outcomes.



Thus, in terms of both European motives and ESDP outcomes, the EU has displayed little if any proclivity to embark on a course of balancing U.S. power. It is hardly surprising, then, that American attitudes toward ESDP have altered profoundly as its developmental trajectory has become clear. After initial disquiet concerning European ambitions, the second Bush administration moved to declare its unequivocal backing for ESDP. This was enunciated clearly and strongly in February 2008 by the American Ambassador to NATO, Victoria Nuland:

I am here today in Paris to say that we agree with France—Europe needs, the United States needs, NATO needs, the democratic world needs—a stronger, more capable European defense capacity. An ESDP with only soft power is not enough . . . President Sarkozy is right—“NATO cannot be everywhere.”

(Nuland 2008)

At the Munich Security Conference in February 2009, Vice President Biden stressed that

We support the further strengthening of European defence, an increased role for the European Union in preserving peace and security, a fundamentally stronger NATO-EU partnership, and a deeper cooperation with countries outside the Alliance who share our common goals and principles.

(Biden 2009)

These are hardly the sentiments of a hegemon concerned about the balancing ambitions of its allies. If U.S. coding of the behavior of the EU really is as accurate as Posen argues, then such statements provide compelling evidence that ESDP is not a challenge—direct or indirect, present or future—to American primacy. Partnership, not rivalry, is increasingly the name of the game on both sides . . .

## Conclusion

The recent wave of theoretically driven literature on ESDP has produced some compelling arguments and fascinating insights. Not least, it has marked an important step in the “mainstreaming” of ESDP as an object of theoretical interest. Yet, as we have illustrated, the claims of the soft balancers are flawed. The ESDP is not the ambitious, military, U.S.-challenging initiative that some have portrayed it as being. Indeed, it could not be so, owing to the nature of the EU itself.

The fundamental mistake of the soft balancers, which creates the gulf between their theoretical claims and empirical reality, is their failure to understand the nature and impact of international institutions like the EU. The EU is both more and less effective than they claim, inhibiting attempts at leadership by its larger member states, while failing effectively to aggregate the power of all the member states.

Paradoxically, the reasons for this institutional structure are understood all too well by realist students of international security. When discussing the need for soft balancing, its proponents argue that it is “as much about preserving a state’s autonomy, independence, and ability to influence international outcomes vis-à-vis a powerful state or group of states as it is about dealing with threats of direct attack from them.” Consequently, the “default position of states, especially when it comes to military matters, is not dependence, but autonomy and independence, if they can achieve it” (Art 2005/2006). Maintaining the independence of one’s own state, in other words, “is an irreducible national value” (Paul 2005).



What the soft balancers fail to appreciate is that such a logic of international politics applies *within* the EU in much the same way as it does in its relations with the outside world (Menon 2006). In good realist fashion, EU member states have proven reluctant to pool sovereignty over defense matters as they have consented to do in areas of “low politics.” Thus they have devised a system in which decisions relating to ESDP must be taken on the basis of unanimity, which, as we have seen, serves to shape the nature of EU security policy in various crucial ways.

ESDP, then, is not merely a limited undertaking, but a *structurally limited* undertaking. And it is in many ways remarkable that such a limited undertaking should have raised such profound concerns regarding its alleged purpose as a tool to balance against U.S. primacy. We would concur that it is “only because the status quo is heavy European dependence on the United States that the ESDP is touted as such a major foreign policy departure” (Brooks and Wohlforth 2005/2006).

Yet this is not to dismiss the relevance of ESDP. The soft balancers, as we have seen, focus their attention entirely on its military aspects. Indeed, there is a tendency among many observers to refer to its other facets somewhat negatively as “nonmilitary crisis management” (Howorth 2007). For some observers, ESDP either represents soft balancing or will “peter out in the way other European security initiatives have done” (Posen 2006). This is to dismiss too quickly the real contribution to security that ESDP—even in its limited, preponderantly nonmilitary form—has made. Certainly, there have also been military missions. Six of these have now been carried out, allowing the EU to hone and demonstrate its ability to project force into even “nonpermissive” theaters such as Bunia or Tchad. Such operations, however, are almost all coordinated with and complemented by civilian assets designed to provide the elements of postconflict reconstruction that is the real trademark of the EU and of ESDP.

Evidence of the demand for security as practiced by the EU is provided by the requests that come in weekly, to both the Council and the Commission, from around the world inviting the EU to undertake civilian crisis management missions on all continents (indeed, several interviewees—at the highest level—have admitted that the EU’s biggest headache at present is the lack of capacity to respond to more than a handful of the missions it is invited to undertake). It is this shortfall between the world’s demands on it and the EU’s capacity to meet those demands, rather than any widely held balancing aspirations, which may well be the ultimate driver of an ESDP that will remain limited by the institutional framework in which it is condemned to exist.

## Notes

- 1 What follows is partly based on several hundred interviews with officials in Brussels and most EU member state capitals carried out by the authors over the course of the last decade.
- 2 The Berlin Plus arrangements date from the Berlin NATO summit of June 1996, at which it was decided that certain NATO assets and capabilities would be made available to the West European Union for use in European only military missions. The creation of ESDP led to a tortuous renegotiation of these agreements, under which the EU can now, with the unanimous consent of the North Atlantic Council (NAC) of the Atlantic Alliance, utilize these NATO assets, with the NAC retaining ultimate control over the mission.

## References

- Art, Robert J. “Europe Hedges its Security Bets.” In *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the Twenty-first Century*, edited by T. V. Paul, J. J. Wirtz, and M. Fortmann. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004.

- . "Striking the Balance." *International Security* 30, no. 3 (2005/2006): 177–85.
- Biden, Joseph. Remarks at the 45th Munich Conference on Security Policy, 2009, Munich.
- Bozo, F. "France and NATO Under Sarkozy: End of the French Exception?" In *Working Paper* (Fondation Pour L'innovation Politique, 2008).
- Brooks, Stephen G., and William C. Wohlforth. "Hard Times for Soft Balancing." *International Security* 30, no. 1 (2005): 72–108.
- Cogan, Charles G. *The Third Option: The Emancipation of European Defense, 1989–2000*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001.
- Council of the European Union. "Presidency Report on ESDP: Annexe 1, Headline Goal 2010, Endorsed by the European Council, Brussels, 17 and 18 June 2004." In *EU Security and Defence: Core Documents 2004*, edited by European Union Institute for Security Studies. Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2004.
- . "Declaration on Strengthening Capabilities." Brussels: 2008.
- Giegerich, Bastian. *European Security and Strategic Culture*. Baden Baden: Nomos, 2006.
- Gnesotto, Nicole. "ESDP: Results and Prospects." In *EU Security and Defence Policy: The First Five Years (1999–2004)*, edited by N. Gnesotto. Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2005.
- Hoan, Geoff. "Address to the Brookings Institute." Washington D.C.: Brookings, 2000.
- Howorth, Jolyon. "Britain, NATO, and CESDP: Fixed Strategy, Changing Tactics." *European Foreign Affairs Review* 5 (2000): 377–96.
- . *Security and Defence Policy in the European Union*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- International Institute for Strategic Studies. *European Military Capabilities: Building Armed Forces for Modern Operations*. London: IISS, 2008.
- ISIS Europe. "ESDP and EU Mission Updates—March 2009." *European Security Review* 43 (2009).
- Jones, Seth G. *The Rise of European Security Cooperation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Keohane, Robert. O. *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.
- Lieber, Keir A., and Gerard Alexander. "Waiting for Balancing: Why the World is Not Pushing Back." *International Security* 30, no.1 (2005): 109–39.
- Lindstrom, Gustav. "Enter the EU Battlgroups [sic]." In *Chaillot Paper no 97*. Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2007.
- Menon, Anand. "The Limits of Comparative Politics: International Relations in the European Union." In *Comparative Federalism: The US and EU in Comparative Perspective*, edited by A. Menon and M. Schain. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- . "Empowering Paradise? ESDP at Ten." *International Affairs* 85, no. 2 (2009): 227–46.
- Mérand, Frédéric. *European Defence Policy: Beyond the Nation State*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Meyer, C. O. *The Quest for a European Strategic Culture: Changing Norms on Security and Defence in the European Union*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Ministère de la Défense. *Les Leçons du Kosovo*. Paris: Ministère de la Défense. 1999.
- Nuland, Victoria. "Ambassador Victoria Nuland, United States Permanent Representative to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Speech to Presse Club and AmCham." Paris, 2008.
- Paul, T. V. "Introduction: The Enduring Axioms of Balance of Power Theory and Their Contemporary Relevance." In *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the Twenty-first Century*, edited by T. V. Paul, J. J. Wirtz, and M. Fortmann. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004.
- . "Soft Balancing in the Age of U.S. Primacy." *International Security* 30, no. 1 (2005): 46–71.
- Posen, Barry R. "ESDP and the Structure of World Power." *The International Spectator* 39, no. 1(2004): 5–17.
- . "European Union Security and Defense Policy: Response to Unipolarity?" *Security Studies* 15, no. 2 (2006): 149–86.

- Rutten, Maartje. *From Saint-Malo to Nice. European Defence: Core Documents, Chaillot Paper 4*. Paris, 2001.
- Sarkozy, Nicolas, and Angela Merkel. "La Sécurité, Notre Mission Commune." *Le Monde*. February 3, 2009.
- Sartori, Giovanni. "Concept Misinformation in Comparative Politics" [error in original. Title should read "Misinformation"]. *The American Political Science Review* 64, no. 4 (1970): 1033–53.
- Schwok, René, and Frédéric Mérand, eds. *L'Union Européenne et la Sécurité Internationale: Théories et Pratiques*. Brussels: Bruylant Academia, 2009.
- SIPRI. *SIPRI Yearbook 2006: Armaments, Disarmament, and International Security*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Solana, Javier. "A Secure Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy." Document proposed by Javier Solana and adopted by the Heads of State and Government at the European Council, Brussels, 2003.
- Tardy, Thierry. *European Security in a Global Context: Internal and External Dynamics*. London: Routledge, 2009.
- Walt, Stephen M. *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy*. New York: Norton, 2005.
- Witney, Nick. *Re-energising Europe's Security and Defence Policy*. London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2008.

## 14 Realism, non-state actors, and the rise of China

Realism became less prominent in the 1990s. In particular, critics questioned the tradition's failure to foresee the end of the Cold War or to provide compelling explanations for the continuation of Western European integration and the lack of immediate balancing against the United States. The optimism that characterized the immediate post-Cold War era and that contributed to realism's loss in appeal was short lived, however. With the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, national security once again became the focus of both academics and policy-makers. Realism's emphasis on conflict and its pessimism complemented the post-9/11 milieu, and not surprisingly it experienced a resurgence within the international relations subfield.

Realism's revival is somewhat odd, however, since the post-9/11 security environment has largely involved threats emanating from non-state actors, international terrorism, and insurgency. These are entities and activities about which realism has traditionally had little to say. Realists have addressed worries about the tradition's relevance to present-day security concerns in a number of ways.

Some realist scholars have acknowledged that realism is not particularly well suited to explaining threats from non-state actors or for suggesting the policies to deal with them. Still, these scholars insist that realists can contribute to current debates by utilizing frameworks and theories from other approaches. Others have argued that realist theories and concepts can be adapted to the study of non-state actors and non-traditional forms of conflict. As evidence, they point to the application of the security dilemma and offense–defense balance concepts to the study of ethnically motivated violence, which has shed considerable light on the causes of internal war. Finally, some within the realist camp have noted that, while realism may not have much to say about non-state actors, this is an inconsequential lacuna. In their view, the real threats to international security have, and will continue to, come from great powers. Several of these scholars point to the rise of China as the single most pressing matter facing the international community, and insist that the current preoccupation with non-state actors is merely a passing fad. According to these realists, as China's power continues to grow and tensions mount between it and the U.S., research programs from the realist tradition will once again take center stage as the approach best able to appreciate the conflictual nature of international politics.

The first reading selection for this chapter reviews these positions and defends realism's contemporary relevance. In response to a sharp critique written by the editors of *Review of International Studies*, Charles Glaser insists that realism has much to offer to the study of the current international environment, even though the tradition has not focused on non-state actors or unconventional conflict. Glaser notes that realism is not an exclusive club that restricts its members from using theories and concepts from other approaches to explain

non-traditional conflict. Moreover, many realist scholars have been able to utilize principles and concepts from realism to contribute to important debates about ethnic violence and civil war.

One such study is Barry Posen's "The security dilemma and ethnic conflict." Posen argues that when a central authority breaks down within a state, ethnic groups experience something akin to the security dilemma that often plagues the relationships between nation-states. Forced to provide for their own security, ethnic groups take measures to improve their material capabilities, which in turn rouses the suspicions and fears of neighboring groups, who then look to do the same. The uncertainty and fear that is caused by the cycle of arming and rearming can often lead to war. As is the case with states, Posen suggests that the severity of the security dilemma experienced by ethnic groups is determined by the relative advantage of offense versus defense and the ability to distinguish offensive from defensive capabilities.

Taking the view that major threats continue to originate from other states, John Mearsheimer argues that the growth of Chinese power is likely to lead to significant security competition between the international system's major powers in the near future. In "China's unpeaceful rise," Mearsheimer uses principles from offensive realism to suggest that, if China continues its ascendancy, it will look to make a bid for regional hegemony in East Asia, much as the U.S. did in the Western Hemisphere in the nineteenth century. If, as Mearsheimer anticipates, China adopts this course, its attempt to dominate East Asia will be met head-on by a balancing coalition led by the U.S., Japan, and Russia. Once engaged in intense security competition, Mearsheimer argues that the potential for a catastrophic war between China and the U.S.-led coalition will be quite high.

Jonathan Kirshner challenges Mearsheimer's views of the future of Sino-American relations, arguing that classical realism provides a more practical foreign policy course than the gloomy prescriptions offered by offensive realism. Given the poor track record of the states that have sought hegemony, Kirshner argues that China is wise enough to know better than to make a bid for regional dominance. Thus, rather than aggressively confronting China, Kirshner suggests that the U.S. and its allies should follow the prescriptions of classical realism and accommodate China's rise. Such a course avoids what Kirshner sees as offensive realism's unnecessary antagonism and presents the best option for maintaining international stability.

# Structural realism in a more complex world

*Charles L. Glaser*

From: *Review of International Studies* 29 (2003): 403–14.

The editors of the *Review of International Studies* have posed a timely challenge to what they term American realism. In broad terms, their editorial makes two points: first, realism has lost its relevance to current international policy; and second, realism does a poor job of explaining the behaviour of the world's major powers. In this brief essay I argue that both of these points are greatly overstated, if not simply wrong. At the same time, I accept that realism provides less leverage in addressing the full spectrum of issues facing the major powers in the post-Soviet and now the post-9/11 world than it did during the Cold War. However, this is neither surprising nor a serious problem, because scholars who use a realist lens to understand international politics can, and have, without inconsistency or contradiction also employed other theories to understand issues that fall outside realism's central focus . . .

## **Security concerns outside of realism's focus—non-state threats**

I agree that the realism is not the key theory for analysing some of the dangers that currently top the international security agenda. However, this is much less of an indictment of the theory than the RIS editorial suggests. Realism is designed to understand relations and interactions between states; we should not be surprised that it has less to tell us about non-state actors. It is also true that the threat posed by non-state actors, specifically terrorists, has increased in relative importance over the past decade, among other reasons because the probability of major-power war has decreased, the probability of terrorists acquiring weapons of mass destruction has increased, and Al-Qaeda has emerged as an especially well organised, technically capable and murderous organisation.

However, this combination of points does not suggest the conclusion that realism is no longer useful, or that scholars who have worked with realist theories cannot analyse threats posed by non-states actors. As discussed at the beginning of this essay, the potential for conflict between states, including major powers, has not been eliminated. Realism, in its various strands, continues to provide important insights into these traditional security questions. Moreover, the current relative danger posed by terrorism and major-power conflict may not be a good indicator of the future. Although certainly a contentious question, future decades might once again see major-power conflict returning to the top of the international security agenda.

Maybe more important here, scholars who have developed and employed realist theories for understanding relations between states are not banned from using other types of theories and tools for analysing other types of dangers. Given the substantial differences between major powers and non-state actors, we should hardly be surprised that scholars would find that a theory that was initially developed to provide a parsimonious analysis of



the interaction between states was inadequate for assessing interactions with and between non-state actors. Moreover, this is not simply a hypothetical possibility—scholars who are known for their contributions to realism have chosen not to restrict their analysis to realist arguments in addressing a range of topics involving non-state actors, including terrorism<sup>1</sup> and ethnic conflict.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, in some of this work scholars have effectively extended realist concepts to conflicts involving non-state actors, with prominent examples including the role of the security dilemma in generating ethnic violence;<sup>3</sup> the advantages of separation and partition for restoring peace and saving lives;<sup>4</sup> and the shortcomings of remaining neutral when intervening in an ethnic conflict, because taking sides may be necessary to end a deadly war.<sup>5</sup>

A related point connects this observation to earlier criticisms of scholars who are usually classified as realists. Many scholars who have worked with realism to analyse relations between states have not confined their research to a single type of theory or level of analysis. For example, scholars who have used defensive realism to establish the policies that a state should pursue have also drawn upon theories of suboptimal decision-making to explain more fully the policies that states have actually pursued.<sup>6</sup> These scholars are still frequently classified as realists and their entire body of work is classified as realism, which then fuels the criticism that realist theory is undermined because it has expanded to include many types of theory that lie outside its paradigmatic boundaries.<sup>7</sup>

This raises two issues that I can only touch on here. First, much of this criticism flows simply from questions of categorisation. We may want to label a scholar who has combined realism with different types of theories a “realist”, even though this label does not fully characterise the individual’s research. But if we use this convention, we need to remember that it is a convenient shorthand, not an accurate description. Especially important for the issue at hand, when categorising theories, we need to be careful not to define realism in terms of all of the scholars who are termed realists. In other words, we should not conflate realism with the scholars who use it.

The second, and more important, issue concerns the rationale for and implications of combining realism with other types of theories to explain the behaviour of major powers. Because realism is designed to address the behaviour of states, the rationale is somewhat more complicated than the rationale, discussed above, for nonstate actors. Structural realism is built on restrictive assumptions—including importantly that states are essentially rational actors—and does not attempt to explain the sources of states’ motives, instead taking them as given. If these restrictions are not met—for example, states pursue suboptimal instead of rational policies—then realism remains valuable, but needs to be supplemented by a theory of suboptimal behaviour. If states misperceive their international environment, then structural realism would explain their strategic interaction, given their (mistaken) perceptions of the material environment, but could not explain their behaviour unless combined with a theory that explained the states’ misperceptions. From one perspective this could be viewed as a defeat for the realist theory, since it does not explain everything. A more productive perspective, I believe, is to see the theories as complementary—fitting together logically and each explaining a central element of the states’ behaviour. Similarly, if states’ behaviour varies depending on their motives, then a still more complete theory would include a layer that explains basic motives.

In sum, realism is not an analytic straightjacket—whether analysing major powers, ethnic conflict or terrorism, so-called realists have drawn on a variety of theoretical tools to advance our understanding of important questions of international policy . . .

## Notes

- 1 See for example, Barry R. Posen, "The Struggle Against Terrorism: Grand Strategy, Strategy and Tactics" and Stephen M. Walt, "Beyond bin Laden: Reshaping US Foreign Policy", both in *International Security*, 26:3 (Winter 2001/02).
- 2 See for example Stephen Van Evera, "Hypotheses on Nationalism and War", *International Security*, 18:4 (Spring 1994), pp. 5–39; and Jack L. Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: Norton, 2000).
- 3 For example, Barry R. Posen, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict", *Survival*, 35:1 (Spring 1993), pp. 27–47.
- 4 Chaim Kaufmann, "Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars", *International Security*, 20:4 (1996), pp. 136–15; John J. Mearsheimer and Robert A. Pape, "The Answer: A Partition Plan for Bosnia", *The New Republic* (14 June, 1993), pp. 22–5, 28; John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen Van Evera, "When Peace Means War", *The New Republic* (18 December, 1995), pp. 16–18, 21.
- 5 Richard K. Betts, "The Delusion of Impartial Intervention", *Foreign Affairs*, 73:6 (November/December 1994), pp. 20–33.
- 6 Key examples include Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); and Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).
- 7 Jeffery W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, "Is Anyone Still a Realist", *International Security*, 24:2 (Fall 1999), pp. 5–55.

# The security dilemma and ethnic conflict

*Barry R. Posen*

From: *Survival* 35, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 27–47.

The end of the Cold War has been accompanied by the emergence of nationalist, ethnic and religious conflict in Eurasia. However, the risks and intensity of these conflicts have varied from region to region: Ukrainians and Russians are still getting along relatively well; Serbs and Slovenians had a short, sharp clash; Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims have waged open warfare; and Armenians and Azeris seem destined to fight a slow-motion attrition war. The claim that newly released, age-old antipathies account for this violence fails to explain the considerable variance in observable intergroup relations.

The purpose of this article is to apply a basic concept from the realist tradition of international relations theory, “the security dilemma”, to the special conditions that arise when proximate groups of people suddenly find themselves newly responsible for their own security. A group suddenly compelled to provide its own protection must ask the following questions about any neighbouring group: is it a threat? How much of a threat? Will the threat grow or diminish over time? Is there anything that must be done immediately? The answers to these questions strongly influence the chances for war . . .

## The security dilemma

The collapse of imperial regimes can be profitably viewed as a problem of “emerging anarchy”. The longest standing and most useful school of international relations theory—realism—explicitly addresses the consequences of anarchy—the absence of a sovereign—for political relations among states.<sup>1</sup> In areas such as the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, “sovereigns” have disappeared. They leave in their wake a host of groups—ethnic, religious, cultural—of greater or lesser cohesion. These groups must pay attention to the first thing that states have historically addressed—the problem of security—even though many of these groups still lack many of the attributes of statehood.

Realist theory contends that the condition of anarchy makes security the first concern of states. It can be otherwise only if these political organizations do not care about their survival as independent entities. As long as some do care, there will be competition for the key to security—power. The competition will often continue to a point at which the competing entities have amassed more power than needed for security and, thus, consequently begin to threaten others. Those threatened will respond in turn.

Relative power is difficult to measure and is often subjectively appraised; what seems sufficient to one state’s defence will seem, and will often be, offensive to its neighbours. Because neighbours wish to remain autonomous and secure, they will react by trying to strengthen their own positions. States can trigger these reactions even if they have no expansionist inclinations. This is the security dilemma: what one does to enhance one’s own

security causes reactions that, in the end, can make one less secure. Cooperation among states to mute these competitions can be difficult because someone else's "cheating" may leave one in a militarily weakened position. All fear betrayal.

Often statesmen do not recognize that this problem exists: they do not empathize with their neighbours; they are unaware that their own actions can seem threatening. Often it does not matter if they know of this problem. The nature of their situation compels them to take the steps they do.

The security dilemma is particularly intense when two conditions hold. First, when offensive and defensive military forces are more or less identical, states cannot signal their defensive intent—that is, their limited objectives—by the kinds of military forces they choose to deploy. Any forces on hand are suitable for offensive campaigns. For example, many believe that armoured forces are the best means of defence against an attack by armoured forces. However, because armour has a great deal of offensive potential, states so outfitted cannot distinguish one another's intentions. They must assume the worst because the worst is possible.

A second condition arises from the effectiveness of the offence versus the defence. If offensive operations are more effective than defensive operations, states will choose the offensive if they wish to survive. This may encourage pre-emptive war in the event of a political crisis because the perceived superiority of the offensive creates incentives to strike first whenever war appears likely. In addition, in the situation in which offensive capability is strong, a modest superiority in numbers will appear to provide greatly increased prospects for military success. Thus, the offensive advantage can cause preventive war if a state achieves a military advantage, however fleeting.

The barriers to cooperation inherent in international politics provide clues to the problems that arise as central authority collapses in multi-ethnic empires. The security dilemma affects relations among these groups, just as it affects relations among states. Indeed, because these groups have the added problem of building new state structures from the wreckage of old empires, they are doubly vulnerable.

Here it is argued that the process of imperial collapse produces conditions that make offensive and defensive capabilities indistinguishable and make the offence superior to the defence. In addition, uneven progress in the formation of state structures will create windows of opportunity and vulnerability. These factors have a powerful influence on the prospects for conflict, regardless of the internal politics of the groups emerging from old empires. Analysts inclined to the view that most of the trouble lies elsewhere, either in the specific nature of group identities or in the short-term incentives for new leaders to "play the nationalist card" to secure their power, need to understand the security dilemma and its consequences. Across the board, these strategic problems show that very little nationalist rabble-rousing or nationalistic combativeness is required to generate very dangerous situations.

### *The indistinguishability of offence and defence*

Newly independent groups must first determine whether neighbouring groups are a threat. They will examine one another's military capabilities to do so. Because the weaponry available to these groups will often be quite rudimentary, their offensive military capabilities will be as much a function of the quantity and commitment of the soldiers they can mobilize as the particular characteristics of the weapons they control. Thus, each group will have to assess the other's offensive military potential in terms of its cohesion and its past military record.

The nature of military technology and organization is usually taken to be the main factor affecting the distinguishability of offence and defence. Yet, clear distinctions between offensive and defensive capabilities are historically rare, and they are particularly difficult to make in the realm of land warfare. For example, the force structures of armed neutrals such as Finland, Sweden and Switzerland are often categorized as defensive. These countries rely more heavily on infantry, which is thought to have weak offensive potential, than on tanks and other mechanized weaponry, which are thought to have strong offensive potential. However, their weak offensive capabilities have also been a function of the massive military power of what used to be their most plausible adversary, the former Soviet Union. Against states of similar size, similarly armed, all three countries would have considerable offensive capabilities—particularly if their infantries were extraordinarily motivated—as German and French infantry were at the outset of World War I, as Chinese and North Vietnamese infantry were against the Americans and as Iran's infantry was against the Iraqis.

Ever since the French Revolution put the first politically motivated mass armies into the field, strong national identity has been understood by both scholars and practitioners to be a key ingredient of the combat power of armies.<sup>2</sup> A group identity helps the individual members cooperate to achieve their purposes. When humans can readily cooperate, the whole exceeds the sum of the parts, creating a unit stronger relative to those groups with a weaker identity. Thus, the “groupness” of the ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic collectivities that emerge from collapsed empires gives each of them an inherent offensive military power.

The military capabilities available to newly independent groups will often be less sophisticated; infantry-based armies will be easy to organize, augmented by whatever heavier equipment is inherited or seized from the old regime. Their offensive potential will be stronger the more cohesive their sponsoring group appears to be. Particularly in the close quarters in which these groups often find themselves, the combination of infantry-based, or quasi-mechanized, ground forces with strong group solidarity is likely to encourage groups to fear each other. Their capabilities will appear offensive.

The solidarity of the opposing group will strongly influence how each group assesses the magnitude of the military threat of the others. In general, however, it is quite difficult to perform such assessments. One expects these groups to be “exclusive” and, hence, defensive. Frenchmen generally do not want to turn Germans into Frenchmen, or the reverse. Nevertheless, the drive for security in one group can be so great that it produces near-genocidal behaviour towards neighbouring groups. Because so much conflict has been identified with “group” identity throughout history, those who emerge as the leaders of any group and who confront the task of self-defence for the first time will be sceptical that the strong group identity of others is benign.

What methods are available to a newly independent group to assess the offensive implications of another's sense of identity?<sup>3</sup> The main mechanism that they will use is history: how did other groups behave the last time they were unconstrained? Is there a record of offensive military activity by the other? Unfortunately, the conditions under which this assessment occurs suggest that these groups are more likely to assume that their neighbours are dangerous than not.

The reason is that the historical reviews that new groups undertake rarely meet the scholarly standards that modern history and social science hold as norms (or at least as ideals) in the West. First, the recently departed multi-ethnic empires probably suppressed or manipulated the facts of previous rivalries to reinforce their own rule; the previous regimes in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia lacked any systemic commitment to truth in historical

scholarship. Second, the members of these various groups no doubt did not forget the record of their old rivalries; it was preserved in oral history. This history was undoubtedly magnified in the telling and was seldom subjected to critical appraisal. Third, because their history is mostly oral, each group has a difficult time divining another's view of the past. Fourth, as central authority begins to collapse and local politicians begin to struggle for power, they will begin to write down their versions of history in political speeches. Yet, because the purpose of speeches is domestic political mobilization, these stories are likely to be emotionally charged.

The result is a worst-case analysis. Unless proven otherwise, one group is likely to assume that another group's sense of identity, and the cohesion that it produces, is a danger. Proving it to be otherwise is likely to be very difficult. Because the cohesion of one's own group is an essential means of defence against the possible depredations of neighbours, efforts to reinforce cohesion are likely to be undertaken. Propagandists are put to work writing a politicized history of the group, and the mass media are directed to disseminate that history. The media may either willingly, or under compulsion, report unfolding events in terms that magnify the threat to the group. As neighbouring groups observe this, they do the same.

In sum, the military capability of groups will often be dependent on their cohesion, rather than their meagre military assets. This cohesion is a threat in its own right because it can provide the emotional power for infantry armies to take the offensive. An historical record of large scale armed clashes, much less wholesale mistreatment of unarmed civilians, however subjective, will further the tendency for groups to see other groups as threats. They will all simultaneously "arm"—militarily and ideologically—against each other.

### *The superiority of offensive over defensive action*

Two factors have generally been seen as affecting the superiority of offensive over defensive action—technology and geography. Technology is usually treated as a universal variable, which affects the military capabilities of all the states in a given competition. Geography is a situational variable, which makes offence particularly appealing to specific states for specific reasons. This is what matters most when empires collapse.

In the rare historical cases in which technology has clearly determined the offence–defence balance, such as World War I, soldiers and statesmen have often failed to appreciate its impact. Thus, technology need not be examined further, with one exception: nuclear weapons. If a group inherits a nuclear deterrent, and its neighbours do as well, "groupness" is not likely to affect the security dilemma with as much intensity as would be the case in non-nuclear cases. Because group solidarity would not contribute to the ability of either side to mount a counterforce nuclear attack, nationalism is less important from a military standpoint in a nuclear relationship.

Political geography will frequently create an "offence-dominant world" when empires collapse. Some groups will have greater offensive capabilities because they will effectively surround some or all of the other groups. These other groups may be forced to adopt offensive strategies to break the ring of encirclement. Islands of one group's population are often stranded in a sea of another. Where one territorially concentrated group has "islands" of settlement of its members distributed across the nominal territory of another group (irredenta), the protection of these islands in the event of hostile action can seem extremely difficult. These islands may not be able to help one another; they may be subject to blockade and siege, and by virtue of their numbers relative to the surrounding population and because of topography, they may be militarily indefensible. Thus, the brethren of the stranded group



may come to believe that only rapid offensive military action can save their irredenta from a horrible fate.<sup>4</sup>

The geographic factor is a variable, not a constant. Islands of population can be quite large, economically autonomous and militarily defensible. Alternatively, they can have large numbers of nearby brethren who form a powerful state, which could rescue them in the event of trouble. Potentially, hostile groups could have islands of another group's people within their states; these islands could serve as hostages. Alternatively, the brethren of the "island" group could deploy nuclear weapons and thus punish the surrounding group if they misbehave. In short, it might be possible to defend irredenta without attacking or to deter would-be aggressors by threatening to retaliate in one way or another.

Isolated ethnic groups—ethnic islands—can produce incentives for preventive war. Theorists argue that perceived offensive advantages make preventive war more attractive: if one side has an advantage that will not be present later and if security can best be achieved by offensive military action in any case, then leaders will be inclined to attack during this "window of opportunity".<sup>5</sup> For example, if a surrounding population will ultimately be able to fend off relief attacks from the home territory of an island group's brethren, but is currently weak, then the brethren will be inclined to attack sooner rather than later.

In disputes among groups interspersed in the same territory, another kind of offensive advantage exists—a tactical offensive advantage. Often the goal of the disputants is to create ever-growing areas of homogeneous population for their brethren. Therefore, the other group's population must be induced to leave. The Serbs have introduced the term "ethnic cleansing" to describe this objective, a term redolent with the horrors of 50 years earlier. The offence has tremendous tactical military advantages in operations such as these. Small military forces directed against unarmed or poorly armed civilians can generate tremendous terror. This has always been true, of course, but even simple modern weapons, such as machine guns and mortars, increase the havoc that small bands of fanatics can wreak against the defenceless. Consequently, small bands of each group have an incentive to attack the towns of the other in the hopes of driving the people away.<sup>6</sup> This is often quite successful, as the vast populations of war refugees in the world today attest.

The vulnerability of civilians makes it possible for small bands of fanatics to initiate conflict. Because they are small and fanatical, these bands are hard to control. (This allows the political leadership of the group to deny responsibility for the actions those bands take.) These activities produce disproportionate political results among the opposing group—magnifying initial fears by confirming them. The presence or absence of small gangs of fanatics is thus itself a key determinant of the ability of groups to avoid war as central political authority erodes. Although almost every society produces small numbers of people willing to engage in violence at any given moment, the rapid emergence of organized bands of particularly violent individuals is a sure sign of trouble.

The characteristic behaviour of international organizations, especially the United Nations (UN), reinforces the incentives for offensive action. Thus far, the UN has proven itself unable to anticipate conflict and provide the credible security guarantees that would mitigate the security dilemma. Once there is politically salient trouble in an area, the UN may try to intervene to "keep the peace". However, the conditions under which peacekeeping is attempted are favourable to the party that has had the most military success. As a general rule, the UN does not make peace: it negotiates cease-fires. Two parties in dispute generally agree to a cease-fire only because one is successful and happy with its gains, while the other has lost, but fears even worse to come. Alternatively, the two sides have fought to a bloody stalemate and would like to rest. The UN thus protects, and to some extent legitimates, the

military gains of the winning side, or gives both a respite to recover. This approach by the international community to intervention in ethnic conflict, helps create an incentive for offensive military operations.

### ***Windows of vulnerability and opportunity***

Where central authority has recently collapsed, the groups emerging from an old empire must calculate their power relative to each other at the time of collapse and make a guess about their relative power in the future. Such calculations must account for a variety of factors. Objectively, only one side can be better off. However, the complexity of these situations makes it possible for many competing groups to believe that their prospects in a war would be better earlier, rather than later. In addition, if the geographic situation creates incentives of the kind discussed earlier, the temptation to capitalize on these windows of opportunity may be great. These windows may also prove tempting to those who wish to expand for other reasons.

The relative rate of state formation strongly influences the incentives for preventive war. When central authority has collapsed or is collapsing, the groups emerging from the political rubble will try to form their own states. These groups must choose leaders, set up bureaucracies to collect taxes and provide services, organize police forces for internal security and organize military forces for external security. The material remnants of the old state (especially weaponry, foreign currency reserves, raw material stocks and industrial capabilities) will be unevenly distributed across the territories of the old empire. Some groups may have had a privileged position in the old system. Others will be less well placed.

The states formed by these groups will thus vary greatly in their strength. This will provide immediate military advantages to those who are farther along in the process of state formation. If those with greater advantages expect to remain in that position by virtue of their superior numbers, then they may see no window of opportunity. However, if they expect their advantage to wane or disappear, then they will have an incentive to solve outstanding issues while they are much stronger than the opposition.

This power differential may create incentives for preventive expropriation, which can generate a spiral of action and reaction. With military resources unevenly distributed and perhaps artificially scarce for some due to arms embargoes, cash shortages or constrained access to the outside world, small caches of armaments assume large importance. Any military depot will be a tempting target, especially for the poorly armed. Better armed groups also have a strong incentive to seize these weapons because this would increase their margin of superiority.

In addition, it matters whether or not the old regime imposed military conscription on all groups in society. Conscription makes arms theft quite easy because hijackers know what to look for and how to move it. Gains are highly cumulative because each side can quickly integrate whatever it steals into its existing forces. High cumulativeness of conquered resources has often motivated states in the past to initiate preventive military actions.

Expectations about outside intervention will also affect preventive war calculations. Historically, this usually meant expectations about the intervention of allies on one side or the other, and the value of such allies. Allies may be explicit or tacit. A group may expect itself or another to find friends abroad. It may calculate that the other group's natural allies are temporarily preoccupied, or a group may calculate that it or its adversary has many other adversaries who will attack in the event of conflict. The greater the number of potential allies for all groups, the more complex this calculation will be and the greater the chance for error.

Thus, two opposing groups could both think that the expected behaviour of others makes them stronger in the short term.

A broader window-of-opportunity problem has been created by the large number of crises and conflicts that have been precipitated by the end of the Cold War. The electronic media provide free global strategic intelligence about these problems to anyone for the price of a shortwave radio, much less a satellite dish. Middle and great powers, and international organizations, are able to deal with only a small number of crises simultaneously. States that wish to initiate offensive military actions, but fear outside opposition, may move quickly if they learn that international organizations and great powers are preoccupied momentarily with other problems . . .

## **Conclusion**

Three main conclusions follow from the preceding analysis. First, the security dilemma and realist international relations theory more generally have considerable ability to explain and predict the probability and intensity of military conflict among groups emerging from the wreckage of empires.

Second, the security dilemma suggests that the risks associated with these conflicts are quite high. Several of the causes of conflict and war highlighted by the security dilemma operate with considerable intensity among the groups emerging from empires. The kind of military power that these groups can initially develop and their competing versions of history will often produce mutual fear and competition. Settlement patterns, in conjunction with unequal and shifting power, will often produce incentives for preventive war. The cumulative effect of conquered resources will encourage preventive grabs of military equipment and other assets.

Finally, if outsiders wish to understand and perhaps reduce the odds of conflict, they must assess the local groups' strategic view of their situation. Which groups fear for their physical security and why? What military options are open to them? By making these groups feel less threatened and by reducing the salience of windows of opportunity, the odds of conflict may be reduced.

Because the international political system as a whole remains a self-help system, it will be difficult to act on such calculations. Outsiders rarely have major material or security interests at stake in regional disputes. It is difficult for international institutions to threaten credibly in advance to intervene, on humanitarian grounds, to protect groups that fear for the future. Vague humanitarian commitments will not make vulnerable groups feel safe and will probably not deter those who wish to repress them. In some cases, however, such commitments may be credible because the conflict has real security implications for powerful outside actors.

Groups drifting into conflict should be encouraged to discuss their individual histories of mutual relations. Competing versions of history should be reconciled if possible. Domestic policies that raise bitter memories of perceived past injustices or depredations should be examined. This exercise need not be managed by an international political institution; non-governmental organizations could play a role. Discussions about regional history would be an intelligent use of the resources of many foundations. A few conferences will not, of course, easily undo generations of hateful, politicized history, bolstered by reams of more recent propaganda. The exercise would cost little and, therefore, should be tried.<sup>7</sup>

In some cases, outside powers could threaten not to act; this would discourage some kinds of aggressive behaviour. For example, outside powers could make clear that if a new state

abuses a minority and then gets itself into a war with that minority and its allies, the abuser will find little sympathy abroad if it begins to lose. To accomplish this, however, outside powers must have a way of detecting mistreatment of minorities.

In other cases, it may be reasonable for outside powers to provide material resources, including armaments, to help groups protect themselves. However, this kind of hard-bitten policy is politically difficult for liberal democratic governments now dominating world politics to pursue, even on humanitarian grounds. In addition, it is an admittedly complicated game in its own right because it is difficult to determine the amount and type of military assistance needed to produce effective defensive forces, but not offensive capabilities. Nevertheless, considerable diplomatic leverage may be attained by the threat to supply armaments to one side or the other.

Non-proliferation policy also has a role to play. In some cases, nuclear weaponry may be an effective way of protecting the weak from the strong. Russia may behave with considerable restraint towards Ukraine as long as some nuclear weapons remain on Ukrainian territory, vulnerable to Ukrainian seizure. However, once the last weapon is gone, Russian nationalists may become much more assertive.

The future balance of power between Ukraine and Russia is less conducive to good relations than the current one, which is the reason Ukrainians have sought Western security guarantees as a *quid pro quo* for ratifying the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) Treaty, for adhering to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and for ridding themselves of nuclear weapons. Absent such guarantees and the measures needed to render them credible, Ukrainians can be expected to prolong the "transition" phase to the non-nuclear status that they have promised.<sup>8</sup> It would be politically difficult for the United States to reverse the arms control initiatives already launched, but it is reasonable to stretch out their implementation. Recent suggestions to accelerate the denuclearization of Ukraine (and Belarus and Kazakhstan), therefore, have it exactly backward.<sup>9</sup> The West should hold Ukraine to a steady, proportional withdrawal schedule over the longest period consistent with the prescribed outline of the START I agreement. Some of the benefits of nuclear deterrence could thus be secured during the coming difficult political and economic transition in Russia and Ukraine.

It will frequently prove impossible, however, to arrange military assets, external political commitments and political expectations so that all neighbouring groups are relatively secure and perceive themselves as such. War is then likely. These wars will confirm and intensify all the fears that led to their initiation. Their brutality will tempt outsiders to intervene, but peace efforts originating from the outside will be unsuccessful if they do not realistically address the fears that triggered the conflicts initially. In most cases, this will require a willingness to commit large numbers of troops and substantial amounts of military equipment to troubled areas for a very long time.

## Notes

- 1 The following realist literature is essential for those interested in the analysis of ethnic conflict: Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1979), Chapters 6 and 8; Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the security dilemma", *World Politics*, no. 2, January 1978, pp. 167–213; Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), Chapter 3; Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966, 1976), Chapters 1 and 6.
- 2 See Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 591–92; Robert Gilpin, "The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism", in Robert E. Keohane,

*Neorealism and its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 300–21, especially pp. 304–308.

- 3 This problem shades into an assessment of “intentions”, another very difficult problem for states in international politics. This issue is treated as a capabilities problem because the emergence of anarchy forces leaders to focus on military potential, rather than on intentions. Under these conditions, every group will ask whether neighbouring groups have the cohesion, morale and martial spirit to take the offensive if their leaders call on them to do so.
- 4 It is plausible that the surrounding population will view irredenta in their midst as an offensive threat by the outside group. They may be perceived as a “fifth column”, that must be controlled, repressed or even expelled.
- 5 See Stephen Van Evera, “The cult of the offensive and the origins of the First World War”, *International Security*, vol. 9, no. 1, Summer 1984, pp.58–107.
- 6 Why do they not go to the defence of their own, rather than attack the other? Here, it is hypothesized that such groups are scarce relative to the number of target towns and villages, so they cannot “defend” their own with any great confidence.
- 7 See Stephen Van Evera, *Managing the Eastern Crisis: Preventing War in the Former Soviet Empire* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Defense and Arms Control Studies Program, 6 January 1992), p. 12.
- 8 Security guarantees are an unlikely substitute for an independent Ukrainian deterrent. Recall the endless arguments about the credibility of the US nuclear guarantee to Germany, in which the United States stationed more than 300,000 troops and thousands of tactical nuclear warheads. The US guarantee to Germany was credible, but mainly due to the elaborate measures taken to make it so.
- 9 See Steven Miller, “Western diplomacy and the Soviet nuclear legacy”, *Survival*. vol. 34, no. 3, Autumn 1992, pp. 21–22, especially footnote 57.

# China's unpeaceful rise

*John J. Mearsheimer*

From: *Current History* 105, no. 690 (April 2006): 160–2.

Can China rise peacefully? My answer is no. If China continues its impressive economic growth over the next few decades, the United States and China are likely to engage in an intense security competition with considerable potential for war. Most of China's neighbors—including India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Russia, and Vietnam—will join with the United States to contain China's power.

To predict the future in Asia, one needs a theory of international politics that explains how rising great powers are likely to act and how other states in the system will react to them. That theory must be logically sound and it must account for the past behavior of rising great powers.

My theory of international politics says that the mightiest states attempt to establish hegemony in their region of the world while making sure that no rival great power dominates another region. This theory, which helps explain US foreign policy since the country's founding, also has implications for future relations between China and the United States.

## **The contest for power**

According to my understanding of international politics, survival is a state's most important goal, because a state cannot pursue any other goals if it does not survive. The basic structure of the international system forces states concerned about their security to compete with each other for power. The ultimate goal of every great power is to maximize its share of world power and eventually dominate the system.

The international system has three defining characteristics. First, the main actors are states that operate in anarchy, which simply means that there is no higher authority above them. Second, all great powers have some offensive military capability, which means that they have the wherewithal to hurt each other. Third, no state can know the intentions of other states with certainty, especially their future intentions. It is simply impossible, for example, to know what Germany or Japan's intentions will be toward their neighbors in 2025.

In a world where other states might have malign intentions as well as significant offensive capabilities, states tend to fear each other. That fear is compounded by the fact that in an anarchic system there is no night watchman for states to call if trouble comes knocking at their door. Therefore, states recognize that the best way to survive in such a system is to be as powerful as possible relative to potential rivals. The mightier a state is, the less likely it is that another state will attack it. No Americans, for example, worry that Canada or Mexico will attack the United States, because neither of those countries is powerful enough to contemplate a fight with Washington. But great powers do not merely strive to be the



strongest great power, although that is a welcome outcome. Their ultimate aim is to be the hegemon—that is, the only great power in the system.

What exactly does it mean to be a hegemon in the modern world? It is almost impossible for any state to achieve global hegemony, because it is too hard to project and sustain power around the globe and onto the territory of distant great powers. The best outcome that a state can hope for is to be a regional hegemon, and thus dominate one's own geographical area. The United States has been a regional hegemon in the Western Hemisphere since the late 1800s. Although the United States is clearly the most powerful state on the planet today, it is not a global hegemon.

States that gain regional hegemony have a further aim: they seek to prevent great powers in other regions from duplicating their feat. Regional hegemons do not want peers. Instead, they want to keep other regions divided among several great powers, so that these states will compete with each other and be unable to focus on them. In sum, my theory says that the ideal situation for any great power is to be the only regional hegemon in the world.

### **The American hegemon**

A brief look at the history of American foreign policy illustrates the explanatory power of this theory. When the United States won its independence from Britain in 1783, it was a small and weak country comprised of 13 states strung along the Atlantic seaboard. The new country was surrounded by the British and Spanish empires and much of the territory between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River was controlled by hostile Native American tribes. It was a dangerous, threat-filled environment.

Over the course of the next 115 years, American policy makers of all stripes worked assiduously to turn the United States into a regional hegemon. They expanded America's boundaries from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans as part of a policy commonly referred to as "Manifest Destiny." The United States fought wars against Mexico and various Native American tribes and took huge chunks of land from them. The nation became an expansionist power of the first order. As Senator Henry Cabot Lodge put it, the United States had a "record of conquest, colonization, and territorial expansion unequalled by any people in the nineteenth century."

American policy makers in that century were not just concerned with turning the United States into a powerful territorial state. They were also determined to push the European great powers out of the Western Hemisphere and make it clear to them that they were not welcome back. This policy, known as the Monroe Doctrine, was laid out for the first time in 1823 by President James Monroe in his annual message to Congress. By 1898, the last European empire in the Americas had collapsed and the United States had become the first regional hegemon in modern history.

However, a great power's work is not done once it achieves regional hegemony. It then must make sure that no other great power follows suit and dominates its area of the world. During the twentieth century, there were four great powers that had the capability to make a run at regional hegemony: Imperial Germany (1900–1918), Imperial Japan (1931–1945), Nazi Germany (1933–1945), and the Soviet Union during the cold war (1945–1989). Not surprisingly, each tried to match what the United States had achieved in the Western Hemisphere in the nineteenth century.

How did the United States react? In each case, it played a key role in defeating and dismantling those aspiring hegemons. The United States entered World War I in April 1917 when Imperial Germany looked like it would win the war and rule Europe. American troops

played a critical role in tipping the balance against the Kaiserreich, which collapsed in November 1918. In the early 1940s, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt went to great lengths to maneuver the United States into World War II to thwart Japan's ambitions in Asia and especially Germany's ambitions in Europe. During the war, the United States helped destroy both Axis powers. And after 1945, American policy makers made certain that Germany and Japan remained militarily weak. Finally, during the cold war, the United States steadfastly worked to prevent the Soviet Union from dominating Eurasia, and in the late 1980s helped relegate its empire to the scrap heap of history.

Shortly after the cold war ended, the first Bush administration's "Defense Guidance" of 1992, which was leaked to the press, boldly stated that the United States was now the most powerful state in the world by far and it planned to remain in that exalted position. In other words, the United States would not tolerate a peer competitor.

That same message was repeated in the famous "National Security Strategy" issued by the second Bush administration in October 2002. There was much criticism of this document, especially its claims about "preemptive war." But hardly a word of protest was raised about the assertion that the United States should check rising powers and maintain its commanding position in the global balance of power.

The bottom line is that the United States—for sound strategic reasons—worked hard for more than a century to gain hegemony in the Western Hemisphere. After achieving regional dominance, it has gone to great lengths to prevent other great powers from controlling either Asia or Europe.

What are the implications of America's past behavior for the rise of China? In short, how is China likely to behave as it grows more powerful? And how are the United States and the other states in Asia likely to react to a mighty China?

### **Predicting China's future**

China is likely to try to dominate Asia the way the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere. Specifically, China will seek to maximize the power gap between itself and its neighbors, especially Japan and Russia. China will want to make sure that it is so powerful that no state in Asia has the wherewithal to threaten it. It is unlikely that China will pursue military superiority so that it can go on a rampage and conquer other Asian countries, although that is always possible. Instead, it is more likely that China will want to dictate the boundaries of acceptable behavior to neighboring countries, much the way the United States makes it clear to other states in the Americas that it is the boss. Gaining regional hegemony, I might add, is probably the only way that China will get Taiwan back.

An increasingly powerful China is also likely to try to push the United States out of Asia, much the way the United States pushed the European great powers out of the Western Hemisphere. We should expect China to come up with its own version of the Monroe Doctrine, as Japan did in the 1930s.

These policy goals make good strategic sense for China. Beijing should want a militarily weak Japan and Russia as its neighbors, just as the United States prefers a militarily weak Canada and Mexico on its borders. What state in its right mind would want other powerful states located in its region? Most Chinese surely remember what happened in the past century when Japan was powerful and China was weak. In the anarchic world of international politics, it is better to be Godzilla than Bambi.

Furthermore, why would a powerful China accept US military forces operating in its

backyard? American policy makers, after all, become apoplectic when other great powers send military forces into the Western Hemisphere. Those foreign forces are invariably seen as a potential threat to American security. The same logic should apply to China. Why would China feel safe with US forces deployed on its doorstep? Following the logic of the Monroe Doctrine, would not China's security be better served by pushing the American military out of Asia?

Why should we expect China to act any differently from how the United States did? Is Beijing more principled than Washington? More ethical? Less nationalistic? Less concerned about survival? China is none of these things, of course, which is why it is likely to imitate the United States and attempt to become a regional hegemon.

### **Trouble ahead**

It is clear from the historical record how American policy makers will react if China attempts to dominate Asia. The United States does not tolerate peer competitors. As it demonstrated in the twentieth century, it is determined to remain the world's only regional hegemon. Therefore, the United States can be expected to go to great lengths to contain China and ultimately weaken it to the point where it is no longer capable of ruling the roost in Asia. In essence, America is likely to behave toward China much the way it behaved toward the Soviet Union during the cold war.

China's neighbors are certain to fear its rise as well, and they too will do whatever they can to prevent the Chinese from achieving regional hegemony. Indeed, there is already substantial evidence that countries like India, Japan, and Russia, as well as smaller powers like Singapore, South Korea, and Vietnam, are worried about China's ascendancy and are looking for ways to contain it. In the end, they will join an American-led balancing coalition to check China's rise, much the way Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and even China joined forces with the United States to contain the Soviet Union during the cold war.

Finally, given Taiwan's strategic importance for controlling the sea lanes in East Asia, it is hard to imagine the United States, as well as Japan, allowing China to control that large island. In fact, Taiwan is likely to be an important player in the anti-China balancing coalition, which is certain to infuriate China and fuel the security competition between Beijing and Washington.

The picture I have painted of what is likely to happen if China continues its rise is not a pretty one. I actually find it categorically depressing and wish that I could tell a more optimistic story about the future. But the fact is that international politics is a nasty and dangerous business, and no amount of goodwill can ameliorate the intense security competition that sets in when an aspiring hegemon appears in Eurasia. That is the tragedy of great power politics.

# The tragedy of offensive realism

## Classical realism and the rise of China

*Jonathan Kirshner*

From: *European Journal of International Relations* 18, no. 1 (March 2012): 53–75.

### Introduction

What is the realist position on how best to deal with the rise of China? Many academic debates invoke versions of a dichotomy of “containment” versus “engagement” strategies, and this suggests an implicit distinction between liberals and realists: liberal engagers and realist containers.<sup>1</sup> Most analysts recognize these as archetypes and treat the complex issues involved with nuance and sophistication, but the distinction certainly captures some broad truth. And there is one very prominent scholar, John Mearsheimer (2001), who argues, from a self-consciously realist orientation, not just for simple containment, but for a determined costly effort to take down China’s emerging power and influence. However, in this article I argue that while this is *a* realist perspective, it is not *the* realist perspective. There are a number of theories and resulting policy prescriptions that can derive from a realist tradition, and they do not speak with one voice. In particular, realist approaches that derive from a classical foundation suggest policies that are fundamentally different from those favored by Mearsheimer.

This does not mean that realists of any stripe can be at all sanguine about the implications of China’s rise. They cannot. And classical realists, if anything, in particular, must be alarmed by the rise of China. A classical realist perspective inherently observes the emergence of new great powers in the system with enormous apprehension, because it expects the ambition of rising states to expand along with their capabilities, and also because of the anxiety that this expectation provokes in their neighbors and potential adversaries . . .

But alarm in and of itself offers very little analytical purchase. There is also, I would argue, a classical realist *position* on what to do about rising states in general, and what to do (from the perspective of the US) about the rise of China in particular. As a general rule (from which there will necessarily be occasional exceptions), the classical realist, however inherently wary and skeptical (very, always), seeks to accommodate rising power. This accommodation is rooted in three core tenets of classical realism: first, and always, is the acknowledgment of the reality of power, which is part of seeing the world as it is, not as we would like it to be; second is an unwillingness to automatically privilege the perspective of those that would defend the status quo; and third is the belief that *politics matters*, and that therefore the future is largely unwritten. It is on this last point that classical realists break most sharply with their structuralist cousins. The classical view holds that while they must, irretrievably, be alert to the condition of anarchy and sensitive to the balance of power, nevertheless states—especially great powers—enjoy considerable discretion with regard to the strategic choices that they can and will make, and that these choices are shaped by the context in which they are made, that is, by both domestic and international politics . . .

## **Why worry about China?**

Classical realism, it must be admitted, starts out worried. Saddled with the standard realist baggage—the dangers implied by politically motivated actors dwelling in anarchy, an alertness to the real possibility of war, and, with that, the prospect of subjugation or annihilation—classical realists also tend to fret about a broader range of potential sources of conflict. (Realists, more so than liberal-materialists, for example, would be more likely to see nationalism as an important influence on state behavior.<sup>2</sup>) Classical realists also tend to share a certain pessimistic view of humanity and of the prospects for fundamental progress or transformation in the nature of human behavior . . .

Classical realists also assume that rising states will want, in a word, more. Nicholas Spykman (1942: 20–4) observed that “the number of cases in which a strong dynamic state has stopped expanding or has set modest limits to its power aims has been very few indeed.” According to Carr (1946: 112), “the exercise of power always appears to beget the appetite for more power”; here Carr cites approvingly Niebuhr, Machiavelli, and Hobbes on the way in which the pursuit of “security” chases the horizon—each incremental advance serves only to raise new insecurities at the frontier of a state’s power. For Gilpin (1981: 106), it is axiomatic that “as the power of a state increases, it seeks to extend . . . its political influence.” *Not that there is anything wrong with that*, realists are typically quick to add, since they are generally reluctant to label the behavior of states in international politics as “good” or “bad.” Rather, states “with political sense will avail themselves of the opportunity to improve their position” in response to changes in the international balance of power, Morgenthau (1951: 33, 135) explains. “The disenchanted sentimentalist and utopian cannot understand the elemental truth of international politics; that no nation can be so good as to not take advantage of a power vacuum.”

Rising powers in particular, then, are potential sources of instability because the self-definition of their interests will expand along with their increasing capabilities (and expectations of still greater power to come); classical realists also expect them to seek not just security, but also status, prestige, and even deference from others. In a world where power is relative (and this is the way realists define power), that extended stride cannot help but encroach on someone else’s toes. But those others, unfortunately, may see it differently, and, from a realist perspective, even without being stepped on other states cannot help but be wary of a rising power, simply because it represents, at the very least, the possibility of a threat. Thrown into this mix is the fact that states often disagree—and not just about interests, but also about narratives, history, legitimacy, justice, and assessments of relative power under the greater uncertainties associated with economic change. Thus while realists attribute most conflicts to the clash of interests—rising powers with greater ambition, other states that prefer to check those drives—an additional problem is that spiral-type conflicts are added on to that combustible heap, often indistinguishably . . .

All of this applies to contemporary international politics—to the rise of China and the response of other states to that rise. China is an emerging great power; it borders other major powers and is implicated in a host of security issues; its demand for energy is a potential source of political friction with other states; and, most notably, it is at the same time an important strategic rival of, and intimately enmeshed economically with, the US. China benefits immensely from its ability to access the American market; and its massive dollar holdings are a key pillar of support for the stability of the US dollar, which in the eyes of many observers rests upon otherwise shaky foundations.<sup>3</sup>

As established above, from a realist perspective, this is not a pretty picture. “For realist

pessimists,” Aaron Friedberg (2005: 17, 18–19) notes, “the single most important feature of the PRC today is its rising power,” and this is seen through a lens of history that focuses on the empirical regularity that rising powers, of all stripes, have time and time again been troublemakers. With regard to the consequences of China’s rise, the realist default setting must be pessimistic: China’s participation in international agreements will be increasingly necessary for those agreements to have meaning, but cooperation between strategic rivals will be brittle; China’s economic interdependence with the US will not inhibit political conflict or even prevent war from breaking out between them; China will become more ambitious, challenging the interests of other states.

But, crucially, while these expectations require classical realists to be alarmed by the consequences of the rise of China, and to anticipate increased international political friction as a result, it certainly does not mean that war is inevitable, and it does not lead to the prescription of superficially obvious policy recommendations. That interdependence will not prevent war, for example—a common realist position—does not mean that interdependence is a “bad thing,” which should be avoided. Rather, it is a condition with political consequences, choices about which require political assessments.

### The tragedy of offensive realism

Realists are thus inescapably pessimistic about and wary of a rising China. But what does this suggest for policy? One realist offers quite a clear answer to this question. John Mearsheimer (2001: 401–2; see also 2005), drawing conclusions from a structural realist theory he derives and labels “offensive realism,” states plainly that “China cannot rise peacefully.” Instead, as its capabilities increase, China will become “an aggressive state determined to achieve regional hegemony.” The inevitability of this is such that the current US policy of engaging China is “misguided,” and “doomed to failure.” A powerful China will seek “to dominate Asia the way the United States dominates the western hemisphere.” Given these conclusions, Mearsheimer urges the US to “reverse course and do what it can to slow the rise of China.”

Mearsheimer starts out on shaky ground; although offering a theory of how states *must* behave (and he reads his theory to conclude that the US will be irresistibly drawn to confront and to try and prevent the rise of China), he is forced from the start to make ad hoc appeals to variables his model otherwise rejects. In his model, states are rational; but sometimes they “do foolish things.” In his model, states “act as realists” and things like domestic politics and ideology are irrelevant; but Americans are ideologically predisposed to “dislike realism,” which usually just results in a hypocritical divergence between America’s rhetoric and its behavior, but in some cases (like current policy toward China) this disposition can cause problems for foreign policy.

This problem is elided by Mearsheimer’s fallback that while offensive realism is primarily a predictive theory, it is also a normative one. As he explains, “offensive realism is mainly a descriptive theory . . . but it is also a prescriptive theory. States *should* behave according to the dictates of offensive realism, because it outlines the best way to survive in a dangerous world.” Or, even more plainly, “if states want to survive, they should always act like good offensive realists” (Mearsheimer, 2001: 11–12).

But Mearsheimer is wrong—analytically wrong in the logic of his predictions and dangerously wrong in his prescriptions. Many (but not all) of the errors of offensive realism are rooted in its structuralism, and, as such, it productively illustrates the pathologies that can result from an over-reliance on structural variables . . .



The fatal flaw in Mearsheimer's argument . . . is in his failure to distinguish between *being* a hegemon and *bidding* for hegemony. It may indeed be that "the ideal situation is to be the hegemon in the system." But according to his theory, "survival is the number one goal of great powers" (Mearsheimer, 2001: 34, 46). The central question for a great power mulling a bid for hegemony, therefore, is not "If I was the hegemon, will I be more likely to survive?" It is, "If I make a bid for hegemony, will I be more likely to survive?" And here the answer should be obvious to any rational great power (and, again, assumption five assumes great power rationality)—bidding for hegemony is one of the few and rare paths *to* destruction for a great power. Most great powers are extremely likely to survive; most great powers that bid for hegemony do not.

In contemporary practice, the facts on the ground expose this basic contradiction of Mearsheimer's argument, rooted in assumptions about the primacy of the survival goal and of rationality. Is China's "survival" really in jeopardy if it does not aggressively bid to dominate all of Asia? Will the US not "survive" if it fails to reach across the Pacific in an effort to strangle the Confucian baby in its cradle? What exactly threatens the survival of these great powers? Given their military establishments, their nuclear deterrents, their economic might, their continental size, and their vast populations—is their survival really imperiled if they do not act as offensive realists? Or is it *only* imperiled if they irrationally act as offensive realists, pushing the few chips that hold the prospects for their destruction across the poker table in a reckless bet to win it all?

But the problem is more general than that. Only a power with a complete ignorance of history would be eager to embark upon a bid for hegemony, if survival was its main goal. After all, most states in modern history that have bid for hegemony—with one exceptional exception—have antagonized their neighbors and eventually elicited an encircling coalition that, indeed, utterly destroyed them, leading to the loss of their territorial integrity and the autonomy of their domestic political order, the two things Mearsheimer says states hold most dear. And this occurs for reasons that do not surprise realists, who assume that states have a primal preference not to be pushed around, and, thus, when they are able, will resist efforts by would-be hegemonies to dominate them.

This ignorance—and resulting catastrophic error—on the part of would-be hegemonies seems at odds with Mearsheimer's assumption of rationality. But it is rooted in his structuralism, which cannot allow for history, or learning. Classical realists would expect states to understand that throwing their weight around—not to mention a bid for hegemony—might be self-defeating; whereas states, acting as structural realists expect them to, will make the same foolish choices over and over again . . .

Mearsheimer acknowledges the argument that he might be accused of advocating self-defeating behavior. But his counter-arguments either strengthen the case against him, by reminding the reader of just how hard it is to achieve regional hegemony, or they throw smoke, by conflating the prospects for success in a given military confrontation between two states with the prospects for success in a bid for hegemony. On the former issue, Mearsheimer (2001: 41, see also pp. 143, 212) repeatedly notes that the one "success story" in this pursuit—the US—is extremely rare: "The United States is the only regional hegemon in modern history, although other states have fought major wars in pursuit of regional hegemony: imperial Japan in Northeast Asia, Napoleonic France, Wilhelmine Germany, and Nazi Germany in Europe. But none succeeded." (Indeed, the other four brought about their own destruction.) On the latter issue, Mearsheimer appeals to the argument that in modern history, the initiator of military conflict won about 60 percent of the time; thus history does not support the contention that resorting to the offensive is unwise. But to start a war is not

the same thing as to bid for regional hegemony. Here the modern scorecard remains one success and four (catastrophic) failures; but instead Mearsheimer cherry-picks the wrong metric. He observes that the Nazis won their wars against France and Poland, but lost against the Soviet Union. Are we to count this as a 66 percent “success” rate for the offensive? No. These three wars were part of *one* bid for hegemony, which failed. At times Mearsheimer suggests that it was a mistake for Germany to take on Russia (though at other times he suggests the opposite), but this simply fails to recognize, somewhat surprisingly given that offensive realism would predict it, that the whole point of all the wars was to bid for regional hegemony, which required confronting Russia.<sup>4</sup>

Mearsheimer (2001: 212, 213) concludes that while the success rate of one out of five is “not impressive,” he nevertheless insists the take-home point is that “the American case demonstrates that it is possible to achieve regional hegemony,” thus proving the naysayers wrong. Instead, “the pursuit of regional hegemony is not a quixotic ambition, although there is no denying it is difficult to achieve. Since the security benefits of hegemony are enormous, powerful states will invariably be tempted to emulate the United States and try to dominate their region of the world.”

### **Suicide solutions?**

Or not. Given the enormous security risks entailed in a bid for hegemony, rational states might well ask, “Just how exceptional is the American case?” Crucially, they might, and should, ask, “Does my neighborhood look more like the one that the US was able to achieve regional hegemony in, or the ones in which the other bidders—all of whom were destroyed—rolled their dice?” Two attributes of the US case that probably contributed to its exceptional success were very weak neighbors and even weaker adversaries. One would think that a power motivated by its survival, before embarking on a course of action that led to the destruction of four out of the five who previously tried it, might at least engage in some back-of-the-envelope calculations on this question rather than “invariably be tempted to emulate the United States.”

Even without recognizing the exceptional nature of the American case, at the abstract level, the entire “inevitable bid for regional hegemony” argument still collapses under the weight of its own illogic. If, as Mearsheimer assumes, states are rational and that their number one motive is to survive, they need to assess the probability of their survival if they do not bid for regional hegemony, and compare that with the increased increment to their survival prospects if they achieve that hegemony against the risk to their survival from attempting the bid. On the first question, what are the expectations of survival for a great power strong enough to be contemplating a bid for regional hegemony, in the absence of such a bid? A very conservative estimate would be 98 percent. Regarding the second calculation, what are their survival prospects after a successful bid? Probably something like 99.999 percent. But if the bid is unsuccessful, it will almost certainly end in their destruction. What are the chances of this? Very, very conservatively, assume that there is a 50 percent chance that bidding for hegemony will catastrophically fail (and this is extremely conservative indeed, given the 80 percent rate Mearsheimer reports and without even considering the possibility that the 20 percent success was the result of extraordinarily uncommon factors).

In sum, even when biasing the odds in favor of offensive realism, it is virtually nonsensical to conclude that a rational, would-be hegemon, motivated by survival, when evaluating the merits of a strategy that would slightly increase their (already extremely high) prospects for

survival but which holds a 50 percent chance of resulting in their utter destruction, would embark upon the course of action predicted with near-deterministic confidence by the theory of offensive realism . . .

Mearsheimer thus offers illogical predictions about, and, worse, dangerous and self-defeating policy prescriptions for, both China and the US. Consider China. Mearsheimer expects a bid for hegemony; again, not due to any grand ambitions, “wicked motives,” or inherently aggressive designs, but rather and nothing more than as the best way to maximize the prospects for China’s survival. Following the discussion above, however, the first question to ask of this claim is what the baseline expectations for China’s survival are against foreign threats in the foreseeable future. They would already seem extremely high. The issue, then, is to calculate the benefits of the added security from achieving hegemony, weighed against the risks of pursuing the bid. And a crucial question here is, “Does China’s neighborhood look more like the American experience, or that of those who tried and failed?”

The answer is obvious. China lives in a very crowded neighborhood. It shares a very long border with Russia, with whom, Mearsheimer notes, it has fought in the past; which he codes as a “great power”; and which has a very large nuclear force. Japan is also very close by. Mearsheimer also codes Japan as a great power; and he notes the mutual suspicion between the two states (Mearsheimer, 2001: 375, 381–2, 393, 396). If frightened or provoked, Japan has the capability to develop an independent nuclear force, and it is difficult to imagine a realist account that would not expect them to do so in such circumstances. China also borders India, a very large, rising, nuclear-armed state, also with whom China has fought in the past, and which has a latent economic potential similar even to that of China’s own. China also borders Vietnam, not a great power, but no pushover, and yet another state with whom China has fought in living memory. A unified (and also nuclear-capable) Korea would be another regional player sharing a border with China.

In sum, there is no good reason to believe that if China is a rational actor motivated primarily to survive, it would embark upon a bid for hegemony. Realists would expect such a bid to elicit hostile responses from its great and regional power neighbors, and contribute to nuclear proliferation of a kind that China would prefer not to see. The fundamental realist question, always, remains, “Is my national interest better or worse off by pursuing this course of action?”; with regard to China, and an aggressive bid for hegemony, the answer is an obvious “no.” It is worth noting that *classical* realists cannot rule out that China would not be so ambitious (or so foolish) as to give it a try; it is simply that such behavior cannot be accounted for by the logic of offensive realism.

As for contemporary American policy, Mearsheimer’s logic is on even shakier ground. Again, it is the assumption that “survival is the number one goal of great powers” that takes much of the wind from the sails of his advice to the US. Mearsheimer wants the US to do everything it can to slow China’s growth, but why? Aside from the fact that China is extremely unlikely to achieve regional hegemony in Asia, even if it somehow did, Mearsheimer makes a convincing case that, while the US might find this at times irritating, this would not threaten the survival of America. And since survival is its primary motive, from that position of security it should enjoy the luxury of choosing its China policy from a broad range of possible options.

After all, the reason why states want to be regional hegemons in the first place is because that position provides them with incredible security, even from other similarly situated powers. As Mearsheimer notes, “regional hegemons certainly pack a powerful military punch, but launching amphibious assaults across oceans against territory controlled and

defended by another power would be a suicidal undertaking.” Mearsheimer elaborates, repeatedly, the secure status of the regional hegemon, and in particular the security of the United States as an “insular state,” given the “stopping power of water,” which he appeals to numerous times as a law-like statement. Indeed, “the best outcome a great power can hope for is to be a regional hegemon” (Mearsheimer, 2001: 40, 41, 114–9, 126, 141). Thus, even before we put the US nuclear deterrent on the table, its survival is simply not threatened by China, even one that somehow, against the odds, achieves regional hegemony.

Mearsheimer raises the notion that if China did achieve regional hegemony, it would find it in its interest to distract the US by trying to foment trouble in America’s backyard, and this might jeopardize regional hegemony. But this is a very problematic fallback position, for two reasons. First, there is nothing to stop China from doing that even without being a regional hegemon. Second, and more to Mearsheimer’s point, such meddling is extremely unlikely to undermine America’s position as a region hegemon, not only because of the realities on the ground in North America, but also because the durability of regional hegemony, once achieved, is extremely robust—after all, that is the engine that motivates his entire theory.

Even by Mearsheimer’s own logic, then, the US is in no way compelled to try and make life miserable for China. And so we are back to the primary realist question—should it? Would such a policy achieve valuable political goals? Setting aside (false) concerns for survival, would an attempt to stem China’s growth advance the national interest of the United States? According to hard-nosed China experts like Tom Christensen, even if US–China relations could be described as a zero-sum competition, such a strategy would be “counterproductive,” because its political ramifications would leave the US “much weaker in the region in relation to China” (Christensen, 2006: 83, 85; see also Art, 2008: 266).

### **What is a (classical) realist to do?**

An awareness of the errors and limitations of structural realism in general and offensive realism in particular only gets us so far: there remains the alarming rise of China, and the question of what to do about it. While classical realism must be wary and pessimistic regarding the consequences of China’s rise, its perspective nevertheless leads to the conclusion that engaging rather than confronting China is the wisest strategy, in the only context that ever matters to realist analysis—that strategy compared to the likely consequences of other options.

This position derives from two foundational classical realist tenets, and two consequences of those beliefs. First is the need to always acknowledge power: both the reality of the power of others and the necessary limitations of one’s own. Related to this is the central importance of accommodation in classical realist thought (and it is on this basis that realists chastise the utopians and idealists). Second is that politics matters: both domestic and international. That is, choices made by states are affected by what goes on inside of them, and choices made by states are also affected by choices made by other states. Related to this is the classical resistance to deterministic theories. Since politics matters, and policies can be chosen, despite the fact that anarchy and the balance of power must powerfully inform state behavior, there are a number of very distinct trajectories along which the foreign policy of a great power can develop. For classical realists, the future is unwritten, and so wise policy matters.

### ***Acknowledging power***

Classical realists cannot speak more clearly and with one voice on this issue. Morgenthau, who considered the Soviet Union to be a present military threat (more present, more clearly defined, and more dangerous than anything China currently approaches), nevertheless wrote at the height of the Cold War—and the height of McCarthyism—that “military preparations must join hands with an accommodating diplomacy.” Morgenthau’s Cold War policy was rooted in general lessons: “We must be strong enough to resist aggression and wise enough to accommodate foreign interests which do not impinge upon our own,” he explained, and urged policymakers to remember, above all, that “no nation’s power is without limits, and hence that its policies must respect the power and interests of others” (Morgenthau, 1951: 70, 88, 242, see also p. 136) . . .

Carr was the realist champion not simply of the need to acknowledge power, but of the wisdom—indeed the necessity—of accommodating rising power. “Consistent realism . . . involves acceptance of the whole historical process and precludes moral judgment on it,” he admonished. The maintenance of international order requires that those at the top make “sufficient concessions,” “and the responsibility for seeing that these changes take place as far as possible in an orderly way rests as much on the defenders as on the challengers” (Carr, 1946: 91, 169) . . .

The need to acknowledge the reality of power and accommodate its rise is so deeply ingrained in classical realism that on at least one occasion its instinctive deployment was a blunder, which serves as a reminder that few laws are sacrosanct, and there are exceptions to every rule. And so both Carr and Kennan, it must be recognized, supported (at the time) the Munich accords, for reasons that flowed naturally from their theoretical predispositions . . .

What is most interesting about this blunder for present purposes is that it derived from an over-reliance on structural-level analysis. Kennan and Carr based their recommendations by focusing only on the balance of power and how it was changing.<sup>5</sup> But Nazi Germany was different. And it was different for reasons that could only be understood by appealing to variables central to classical realism, but forbidden by structural realism: history, ideology, domestic politics, and the nature of its leadership. Morgenthau, on the other hand, opposed the Munich accords, and he did so for good classical reasons. Simply put he recognized, for those reasons, that the Nazis were different, and dangerously so (Morgenthau, 1939: 483–4). As a classical realist he could see the red flags waving vigorously here; the narrow structuralist is willfully color-blind.

It should be emphasized, however, that while Morgenthau was right about Munich, this experience did not change his perspective on the importance, more generally, for the need to respect and accommodate power whenever circumstances would safely permit it. Never wavering in his harsh critique of the Munich accords, Morgenthau was nevertheless also critical of the subsequent trotting out of the Munich analogy to discredit all attempts at accommodation. He quoted Churchill’s 1950 speech before the House of Commons approvingly: “Appeasement in itself may be good or bad according to the circumstances. Appeasement from weakness and fear is alike futile and fatal. Appeasement from strength is magnanimous and noble and might be the surest and perhaps the only path to world peace.” To this, Morgenthau himself added, “Future historians will have to decide whether the Western world has suffered more from the surrender at Munich . . . or from the intellectual confusion that equates a negotiated settlement with appeasement and thus discredits the sole rational alternative to war” (Morgenthau, 1951: 137, 138).

***Politics matters***

Classical realism also places great emphasis on politics, domestic and international, and even considers the role of things like ideas, norms, and legitimacy; politics that structural realism rejects, and concepts that it dismisses at most as solely instrumental of power . . .

In particular, for the classical realist, domestic politics matters. Thucydides routinely appealed to regime type (and factional conflict within regimes) in his explanation of why actors behaved in a certain way in world politics (Strassler, 1996: 14, 318, 328, 346, 348, 481). Gilpin (1971: 401, 403; 1989: 23) repeatedly gives causal weight to domestic and ideational variables. Indeed, he highlights the distinct realist emphasis on “national sentiment” and “political values.” Carr took very seriously the role of public opinion (“power over opinion . . . is a necessary part of all power”, 1939: 130), and both Morgenthau and Kennan noted the influence of domestic politics and ideology on the practice of American foreign policy . . .

If domestic politics matters (and classical realists think it does), then things that influence it—like the foreign policy choices of other states—matter as well. International politics can affect the balance of economic and political power within states by creating (or foreclosing) opportunities in the international system that benefit some groups within states over others, and make more or less plausible (and defensible, in domestic debates) certain grand strategies. Policies of containment and restriction disempower those groups with the most to gain from warm relations with the rest of the world, reinforce negative perceptions of the hostile intentions of others, and reduce the opportunity costs of a belligerent foreign policy. The collapse of the global economy in the 1930s, for example, shifted the domestic balance of power within societies away from liberal internationalists, and contributed to (which is not to say it caused) the rise of fascism.

This is another perspective that divides classical from structural realists that invites confusion, perhaps because it sounds a little too much like the notion that “interdependence causes peace,” which realists of all stripes reject. But this argument is different, and has a good realist pedigree. Albert Hirschman, in a study of economic coercion, also illustrated how economic relations between states strengthened “like-minded” groups at the expense of others, and influenced the trajectory of how the national interest was defined. Classical realists see politics shaping the pattern of economic relations, and those relations reinforcing their political foundations.<sup>6</sup>

**Conclusion: The unwritten future**

The trajectory of state choices—especially of great powers, which have room for maneuver—is uncertain, and contingent. This is true in general, and this is true for contemporary China . . .

What, then, are the consequences of alternative political actions for the US with regard to the rise of China? Almost all China hands and Asian security specialists consider its future foreign policy trajectory to be uncertain.<sup>7</sup> It may emerge as a responsible great power, or it may blunder into a disastrous bid for hegemony. American foreign policy will be one factor among several that shapes this choice. An “offensive realist” approach, designed to “make sure that China does not become a peer competitor” (Mearsheimer, 2001: 400), is suspect (at best) in its logic, handcuffed by the limits of its structuralism, and, ironically, rooted in utopianism—an attempt to reshape the world as one would like to see it, rather than respecting the realities of power. It is also, from the perspective of the self-interest of the US,



almost certainly a self-fulfilling, and self-defeating, prophesy. If it turns out (as is likely) that the US simply does not have the capability to inhibit China's rise, certainly the prophesy of a powerful and hostile China will be realized by the attempt. If by chance it is "successful," the effort by the US to slow China's rise would backfire, for three reasons: it would be very costly, it would seriously harm America's international political position, and it would make China much more dangerous.

China holds over two trillion dollars in foreign exchange reserves, most of which are in the form of US dollar assets, in particular US government debt. This can sound ominous, but, in practice, this position gives China much less practical coercive leverage over the US than it might seem. China has found itself (if with mixed emotions after the financial crisis of 2007–8) with considerable vested interests in both the future of the dollar and in the general health of the US economy, its largest export market. China would be a big loser in a confrontation that undermined either the greenback or American consumer demand. But if push came to shove cooler heads would be unlikely to prevail, and a Sino-American macroeconomic tussle that seriously implicated the dollar would leave both countries much worse off.<sup>8</sup> But it is not hard to imagine China going "financially nuclear" in response to US policies explicitly designed to take down the People's Republic. In aggressively confronting China, the US would be inviting the very high costs of an unwanted and major crisis of the dollar, which would seriously harm not just its economy, but America's global military capacity as well (Kirshner, 2008: 431).

The US would not be the only victim of its "success" in damaging China's economy—the collateral damage would be widespread and considerable, for China has become both a pillar and an engine of global economic growth. It is commonly reported with fanfare that China is the world's second largest economy, and that it has surpassed Germany to become the world's largest exporter. Less discussed is China's increasing importance as an *importer* of other countries' products. In 2008 China was the world's third largest importer, and it is poised to take the number two slot, behind the United States.<sup>9</sup> In 2008 China was the biggest export market for—among others—Argentina, Chile, Iran, Kazakhstan, Oman, Yemen, Burma, Taiwan, and South Korea (which exported twice as much to China as it did to the United States). China was the second most important importer of goods from a host of countries including Australia, Japan, and Peru, and was a very important export market for scores of others, including the United States, which exported more to China than it did to any other country except for Canada and Mexico (International Monetary Fund, 2009; World Trade Organization, 2009). China's value as an export market for the world is only likely to increase in importance in the coming years, both as it recovers earlier than others from the "great recession" and as it resumes high rates of annual economic growth. If, then, the US was somehow able, at great cost and effort, to knock down China's rate of economic growth, it would also take the wind from the sails of China's demand for imports, leaving behind an angry mob of exporting countries in distress, who would (correctly) blame the US for their economic (and subsequent political) woes.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, successful US policies that wounded the Chinese economy would generate perverse outcomes; the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, desperate for a new foundation of legitimacy, could easily resort to virulent nationalism; and stripped of the expectation that many of its foreign policy goals will be best achieved implicitly as a natural consequence of its continued ascendancy, China might adopt more aggressive, risk-acceptant international strategies, especially if it perceived its relative power to be diminishing. More generally, a highly antagonistic US posture toward China would almost certainly bring about that self-fulfilling prophecy; assuring a wounded, hostile, dangerous adversary.<sup>11</sup>

In sum, a full-blown confrontation with China along the lines suggested by offensive realism would be a self-mutilating geopolitical gesture that would damage the US, undermine its international political influence, and result in an angry and unstable China—and that is if it worked. Classical realism, on the other hand, expects a rising China to be more ambitious, assertive, and, often, difficult to deal with. There is cause for concern—even grave concern. But however wary and pessimistic as they approach the table, classical realists nevertheless place their (always) hedged bets on those policies that have the best chance of shaping China's domestic political debates and international opportunities so as to encourage and accommodate its peaceful rise to great power status.

## Notes

- 1 See, for example, Christensen (2001: 34); Economy (2004: 96–7); Friedberg (2005: 39, 43–4); Goldstein (2007: 642); Ikenberry (2008: 24, 31, 37); Lampton (2008); Ross (2006a: 211–12); Roy (2003: 125, 132–34); Shambaugh (2005: 42); Wang (2006: 4, 6, 29); Yue (2008: 450–51).
- 2 Obviously, structural realists also shed nationalism as relevant for analysis. On these issues see Abdelal (2001).
- 3 On this last point see Helleiner and Kirshner (2009).
- 4 See Mearsheimer (2001: 39, 209, 211): “a careful analysis of the Japan and German cases reveals that, in each instance the decision for war was a reasonable response.”
- 5 Here I refer to Carr with regard to his framework in *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, which is an appropriate delimitation for the discussion here. It should be noted that Carr more generally is a complex and contested figure, which space limitations prevent addressing here.
- 6 Hirschman (1980 [1945]: 18, 28, 29, 34, 37); see also Abdelal and Kirshner (1999–2000).
- 7 See for example Christensen (2006); Friedberg (2005: esp. 8, 43, 45); Goldstein (2005: esp. 204, 219); Johnston (2003: 56); Ross and Feng (2008).
- 8 On these issues see Chin and Helleiner (2008: 92, 98–9); Drezner (2009: 20–22, 40–41); Kirshner (2008: 428); Wang (2007: 34).
- 9 See Li (2007: 842–843); Lum et al. (2008: 4, 9, 11, 14); Shambaugh (2005: 36–38). Also, for a more qualified view of the political consequences, see Ross (2006b: 365–6, 376, 378).
- 10 As Christensen argues, “full-spectrum containment . . . would be counter-productive.” “The United States would likely gain no new allies in such an effort and would lose some, if not all of its current regional allies” (2006: 125). See also Shambaugh (2004–5: 85).
- 11 On the dangers of economic distress, see Shirk (2007: 255). Fravel (2007–8: 47) argues that China is more likely to resort to force when it feels like it is falling behind, not rising; see also Art (2008: 284).

## References

- Abdelal, Rawi. *National Purpose in the World Economy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.
- Aron, Raymond. *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations*. New York: Doubleday, 1966.
- Art, Robert. “The United States and the Rise of China.” In *China's Ascent: Power, Security, and the Future of International Politics*, edited by Robert Ross and Zhu Feng. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008.
- Carr, E.H. *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939*, 1st edn. London: Macmillan, 1939.
- . *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939*, 2nd edn. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1946.
- Chin, Gregory and Eric Helleiner. “China as a Creditor: A Rising Financial Power?” *Journal of International Affairs* 62, no. 1 (2008): 87–102.
- Christensen, Thomas. “Posing Problems Without Catching Up: China's Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy.” *International Security* 25, no. 4 (2001): 5–40.
- . “Fostering Stability or Creating a Monster? The Rise of China and U.S. Policy toward East Asia.” *International Security* 31, no.1 (2006): 81–126.

- Drezner, Daniel W. "Bad Debts: Assessing China's Financial Influence in Great Power Politics." *International Security* 43, no. 2 (2009): 7–45.
- Economy, Elizabeth. "Don't Break the Engagement." *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 3 (2004): 96–109.
- Fravel, M. Taylor. "Power Shifts and Escalation: Explaining China's Growing Use of Force in Territorial Disputes." *International Security* 32, no. 3 (2007–8): 44–83.
- Friedberg, Aaron. "The Future of U.S.–China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?" *International Security* 30, no. 2 (2005): 7–45.
- Gilpin, Robert. "The Politics of Transnational Economic Relations." *International Organization* 25, no. 3 (1971): 398–419.
- . *War and Change in World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- Goldstein, Avery. *Rising to the Challenge: China's Grand Strategy and International Security*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.
- . "Power Transitions, Institutions, and China's Rise in East Asia: Theoretical Expectations and Evidence." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30, no. 4–5 (2007): 639–682.
- Helleiner, Eric and Jonathan Kirshner, eds. (2009) *The Future of the Dollar*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009.
- Hirschman, Albert. *National Power and the Structure of Foreign Trade*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980 [1945].
- Ikenberry G. John. "The Rise of China and the Future of the West: Can the Liberal System Survive?" *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 1 (2008): 23–37.
- International Monetary Fund. *Direction of Trade Statistics, Yearbook 2009*. Washington, DC: IMF, 2009.
- Johnston, Alastair Iain. "Is China a Status-Quo Power?" *International Security* 27, no. 4 (2003): 5–56.
- Kirshner, Jonathan. "Dollar Primacy and American Power: What's at Stake?" *Review of International Political Economy* 15, no. 3 (2008): 418–438.
- Lampton, David. *The Three Faces of Chinese Power: Might, Money and Minds*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.
- Li, He. "China's Growing Interest in Latin America and its Implications." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30, no. 4–5 (2007): 833–862.
- Lum, Thomas, Morrison, Wayne, and Bruce Vaughn. "China's 'Soft Power' in Southeast Asia." *CRS Report for Congress RL34310*. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 4 January, 2008.
- Mearsheimer, John. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: Norton, 2001.
- . "Clash of the Titans." *Foreign Policy* 146 (2005): 46–50.
- Morgenthau, Hans. *In Defense of the National Interest*. New York: Knopf, 1951.
- . "International Affairs: The Resurrection of Neutrality in Europe." *American Political Science Review* 33, no. 3 (1939): 473–486.
- Ross, Robert. "China if by Land, United States if by Sea: The Strategic Foundations of Stable U.S.–China Relations." *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 12, no. 2 (2006a): 207–213.
- . "Balance of Power Politics and the Rise of China: Accommodation and Balancing in East Asia." *Security Studies* 15, no. 3 (2006b): 355–395.
- Ross, Robert and Zhu Feng. "The Rise of China: Theoretical and Policy Perspectives." In *China's Ascent: Power, Security, and the Future of International Politics*, edited by Robert Ross and Zhu Feng. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008.
- Roy, Denny. "Rising China and U.S. Interests: Inevitable vs. Contingent Hazards." *Orbis* 47, no. 1 (2003): 125–137.
- Shambaugh, David. "China Engages Asia: Reshaping the Regional Order." *International Security* 29, no. 3 (2004–05): 64–99.
- . "Return to the Middle Kingdom? China and Asia in the Early Twenty-first Century." In *Power Shift: China and Asia's New Dynamics*, edited by David Shambaugh. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.
- Shirk, Susan. *China: Fragile Superpower*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Spykman, Nicholas. *America's Strategy in World Politics*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1942.

- Strassler, Robert. *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to The Peloponnesian War*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.
- Wang, Xin. "China as a Net Creditor: An Indication of Strength or Weakness?" *China & World Economy* 15, no. 6 (2007): 22–36.
- Wang, Yuan-Kang. "China's Grand Strategy and US Primacy: Is China Balancing American Power?" *Brookings Institution Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies*, 2006.
- World Trade Organization. *International Trade Statistics, 2009*. Geneva: WTO, 2009.
- Yue, Jianyong. "Peaceful Rise of China: Myth or Reality?" *International Politics* 45 (2008): 439–456.

## 15 Is realism heading in the right direction?

As the preceding chapters illustrate, realism is a rich and diverse tradition encompassing several different research programs. Over the years, as the newer programs have emerged, realists have broadened the menu of candidate causes that might influence behavior and outcomes in international politics. Contemporary critics have argued that these additions have been unhelpful, either because they have been adopted simply to allow realists to “cover” known anomalies, or because they have been inconsistent with the core of the program to which they were added.

Much of this criticism has been leveled against neoclassical realism, which challenges the anti-reductionism of Waltz’s neorealism, and reopened the tradition to the use of non-material and non-structural variables. Critics have suggested that the inclusion of these variables only serves to cover up evidence that would otherwise weaken realist claims. They have also argued that the amendments make the realist tradition indistinguishable from its liberal and constructivist counterparts. Realists have responded to these charges by noting that there is room in the tradition for more than one research program, and by reminding critics that realism is more than just neorealism. This dialogue is represented in the readings selected for this chapter.

John Vasquez, in a selection from his article “The realist paradigm and degenerative versus progressive research programs,” makes the first criticism: that theories have simply been changed to explain anomalies. Using a Lakatosian framework, Vasquez claims that recent revisions to neorealist balance of power theory have been made in order to explain away evidence that contradicts its key predictions. Among those that he criticizes, Vasquez cites Stephen Walt’s balance of threat theory and Thomas Christensen and Jack Snyder’s offense–defense balance explanation of alliance behavior. According to Vasquez, theories such as these simply try to cover up neorealism’s theoretical and empirical flaws. Hence, they constitute degenerative problem shifts in the Lakatosian sense, and they strip realism of its once progressive character.

In response, Waltz insists that Vasquez’s critique wrongly groups different realist theories in the same research program, even though they work from different baseline assumptions. Vasquez’s challenge is thus artificial, leveled against an invented research program that Vasquez pulls together from research that originates elsewhere. According to Waltz, some of the realist theories about balancing behavior critiqued by Vasquez do not accept neorealism’s basic assumptions, and thus cannot be judged as a part of the neorealist research program. Other work critiqued by Vasquez is more properly characterized as applications of neorealism to foreign policy analysis. Either way, Waltz insists that the progressiveness of neorealism cannot be determined by evaluating theories that lie well beyond the bounds of the neorealist research program.

Similarly, Stephen Walt counters Vasquez's claims that his balance of threat theory only serves to cover up evidence that disconfirms neorealism by noting that realism is a large research tradition composed of many, often conflicting, viewpoints. Walt argues that, by making realism synonymous with neorealism, Vasquez is able to characterize views that differ from those of Waltz as evidence of realism's degeneration, without ever considering the novel facts that those theories produce. Walt suggests that, had Vasquez given realism a fair treatment, he would have seen just how progressive recent scholarship has truly been.

The second type of critique, inconsistency with core principles, is leveled by Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik. They claim that realism has lost its trademark distinctiveness in recent years, as realists have incorporated into their theories variables that are usually associated with liberalism and constructivism. Much of the authors' evaluation is directed at defensive and neoclassical realists and their use of domestic-level and ideational variables to explain foreign policy. According to Legro and Moravcsik, despite claims to the contrary, contemporary realist scholarship no longer treats considerations of power as the chief concern of states, but instead views non-material and domestic variables as more important when it comes to foreign policy decision-making. As a result of the weight given to these factors, the authors claim that realism now suffers from serious internal contradictions and that it has become less distinct from other theoretical approaches.

Writing in response to Legro and Moravcsik, Randall Schweller claims that the authors have put realism in a theoretical straitjacket, forbidding its adherents from saying anything about phenomena other than conflict and war. Schweller accuses Legro and Moravcsik of applying a double standard in their assessment of the realist tradition. While liberalism is applauded for evolving from an approach that was concerned primarily with cooperation and peace to one that is now based on the sources of state preferences, realism is scorned for taking similar evolutionary steps. By maintaining a focus on power and competition, Schweller insists that recent scholarship is as "realist" as its predecessors, even though it extends the tradition into new areas of research.

Finally, William Wohlforth rejects Legro and Moravcsik's claims about the realist tradition, arguing that they are not a genuine attempt to evaluate realist theories, but instead represent the authors' desires to advance a particular vision of the international relations subfield. Wohlforth maintains that the authors have staked their claims to certain intellectual territory in order to recast the subfield as one that is dominated by four distinct research traditions. In advancing their views of the field, Wohlforth maintains that Legro and Moravcsik have grossly misrepresented the views of realism and inaccurately cast the tradition as one that is failing to make useful theoretical advancements.



# **The realist paradigm and degenerative versus progressive research programs**

## **An appraisal of neotraditional research on Waltz's balancing proposition**

*John A. Vasquez*

From: *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (December 1997): 899–912.

Within international relations inquiry, the debate over the adequacy of the realist paradigm has been fairly extensive since the 1970s. In Europe it is often referred to as the interparadigm debate (see Banks 1985; Smith 1995, 18–21). In North America, the focus has been more singularly on realist approaches and their critics (see Vasquez 1983). Toward the end of the 1970s, it appeared that alternate approaches, such as transnational relations and world society perspectives, would supplant the realist paradigm. This did not happen, partly because of the rise of neorealism, especially as embodied in the work of Waltz (1979). Now the debate over the adequacy of the realist paradigm has emerged anew . . .

It will be argued that what some see as theoretical enrichment of the realist paradigm is actually a proliferation of emendations that prevent it from being falsified. It will be shown that the realist paradigm has exhibited (1) a protean character in its theoretical development, which plays into (2) an unwillingness to specify what form(s) of the theory constitutes the true theory, which if falsified would lead to a rejection of the paradigm, as well as (3) a continual and persistent adoption of auxiliary propositions to explain away empirical and theoretical flaws that greatly exceed the ability of researchers to test the propositions and (4) a general dearth of strong empirical findings. Each of these four characteristics can be seen as “the facts” that need to be established or denied to make a decision about whether a given research program is degenerating . . .

### **The balancing of power: the great new law that turned out not to be so**

One of Waltz's (1979) main purposes was to explain what in his view is a fundamental law of international politics: the balancing of power. Waltz (pp. 5, 6, 9) defines theory as statements that explain laws (i.e., regularities of behavior). For Waltz (p. 117), “whenever agents and agencies are coupled by force and competition rather than authority and law,” they exhibit “certain repeated and enduring patterns.” These he says have been identified by the tradition of *Realpolitik*. Of these the most central pattern is balance of power, of which he says: “If there is any distinctively political theory of international politics, balance-of-power theory is it” (p. 117). He maintains that a self-help system “stimulates states to behave in ways that tend toward the creation of balances of power” (p. 118) and that “these balances tend to form whether some or all states consciously aim to establish [them]” (p. 119). This law or regularity is what the first six of the nine chapters in *Theory of International Politics* are trying to explain (see, in particular, Waltz 1979, 116–28).

The main problem, of course, is that many scholars, including many realists, such as Morgenthau ([1948] 1978, chapter 14), do not see balancing as the given law Waltz takes it to be. In many ways, raising it to the status of a law dismisses all the extensive criticism that has been made of the concept (Claude 1962; Haas 1953; Morgenthau [1948] 1978, chapter 14) (see Waltz 1979, 50–9, 117, for a review). Likewise, it also sidesteps a great deal of the theoretical and empirical work suggesting that the balance of power, specifically, is not associated with the preservation of peace (Organski 1958; Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey 1972; see also the more recent Bueno de Mesquita 1981; the earlier work is discussed in Waltz 1979, 14–5, 119).

Waltz (1979) avoided contradicting this research by arguing, like Gulick (1955), that a balance of power does not always preserve the peace because it often requires wars to be fought to maintain the balance. What Waltz does here is separate two possible functions of the balance of power—protection of the state in terms of its survival versus the avoidance of war or maintenance of the peace. Waltz does not see the latter as a legitimate prediction of balance-of-power theory. All he requires is that states attempt to balance, not that balancing prevents war.

From the perspective of Kuhn ([1962] 1970, 24, 33–4) one can see Waltz (1979) as articulating a part of the dominant realist paradigm. Waltz is elaborating one of the problems (puzzles as Kuhn [1962] 1970, 36–7, would call them) that Morgenthau left unresolved in *Politics among Nations*; namely, how and why the balance of power can be expected to work and how major a role this concept should play within the paradigm. Waltz's (1979) book can be seen as a theoryshift that places the balance of power in much more positive light than does Morgenthau (cf. 1978, chapter 14). This theoryshift tries to resolve the question of whether the balance is associated with peace by saying that it is not. Waltz, unlike Morgenthau, sees the balance as automatic; it is not the product of a particular leadership's diplomacy but of system structure. The focus on system structure and the identification of "anarchy" are two of the original contributions of Waltz (1979). These can be seen as the introduction of new concepts that bring novel facts into the paradigm. Such a shift appears progressive, but whether it proves to be so turns on whether the predictions made by the explanation can pass empirical testing.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the proposition on balancing is the focus of much of the research of younger political scientists influenced by Waltz. Walt, Schweller, Christensen and Snyder, and the historian Schroeder all cite Waltz and consciously address his theoretical proposition on balancing. They also cite and build upon the work of one another; that is, those who discuss bandwagoning cite Walt (e.g., Levy and Barrett 1991, Schweller 1994; those who talk about buck-passing cite Christensen and Snyder, 1990). More fundamentally, they generally are interested (with the exception of Schroeder, who is a critic) in working within the realist paradigm and/or defending it. They differ in terms of how they defend realism. Because they all share certain concepts, are concerned with balancing, and share a view of the world and the general purpose of trying to work within and defend the paradigm, they all can be seen as working on the same general research program. Thus, what they have found and how they have tried to account for their findings provide a good case for appraising the extent to which this particular research program is progressive or degenerating.

### ***Balancing versus bandwagoning***

A passing comment Waltz (1979, 126) makes about his theory is that in anarchic systems (unlike domestic systems), balancing not bandwagoning (a term for which he thanks Stephen Van Evera) is the typical behavior.<sup>1</sup> This is one of the few unambiguous empirical predictions in his theory; Waltz (p. 121) states: "Balance-of-power politics prevail wherever two, and only two, requirements are met: that the order be anarchic and that it be populated by units wishing to survive."

The first major test is conducted by Walt (1987), who looks primarily at the Middle East from 1955 to 1979. He maintains that "balancing is more common than bandwagoning" (Walt 1987, 33). Consistent with Waltz, he argues that, in general, states should not be expected to bandwagon except under certain identifiable conditions (p. 28). Contrary to Waltz, however, he finds that they do not balance power! Instead, he shows that they balance against threat (chapter 5), while recognizing that for many realists, states should balance against power (pp. 18–9, 22–3).<sup>2</sup> He then extends his analysis to East–West relations and shows that if states were really concerned with power, then they would not have allied so extensively with the United States, which had a very overwhelming coalition against the USSR and its allies. Such a coalition was a result not of the power of the USSR but of its perceived threat (pp. 273–81).

Here is a clear falsification of Waltz (in the naive falsification sense of Popper 1959; see Lakatos 1970, 116), but how does Walt deal with this counterevidence or counterinstance, as Lakatos would term it? He takes a very incrementalist position. He explicitly maintains that balance of threat "should be viewed as a refinement of traditional balance of power theory" (Walt 1987, 263). Yet, in what way is this a "refinement" and not an unexpected anomalous finding, given Waltz's prediction? For Morgenthau and Waltz, the greatest source of threat to a state comes from the possible power advantages another state may have over it. In a world that is assumed to be a struggle for power and a self-help system, a state *capable* of making a threat must be guarded against because no one can be assured when it may actualize that potential. Hence, states must balance against power regardless of immediate threat. If, however, power and threat are independent, as they are perceived to be by the states in Walt's sample, then something may be awry in the realist world. The only thing that reduces the anomalous nature of the finding is that it has not been shown to hold for the central system of major states, that is, modern Europe. If it could be demonstrated that the European states balanced threat and not power, then that would be a serious if not devastating blow for neorealism and the paradigm.<sup>3</sup>

As it stands, despite the rhetorical veneer, Walt's findings are consistent with the thrust of other empirical research: The balance of power does not seem to work or produce the patterns that many theorists have expected it to produce. For Walt, it turns out that states balance but not for reasons of power, a rather curious finding for Waltz, but one entirely predictable given the results of previous research that found the balance of power was not significantly related to war and peace (Bueno de Mesquita 1981; see also Vasquez 1983, 183–94).

The degenerating tendency of the research program in this area can be seen in how Walt conceptualizes his findings and in how the field "refines" them further. "Balance of threat" is a felicitous phrase. The very phraseology makes states' behavior appear much more consistent with the larger paradigm than it actually is. It rhetorically captures all the connotations and emotive force of balance of power while changing it only incrementally. It appears as a refinement—insightful and supportive of the paradigm. In doing so, it strips away the anomalous nature and devastating potential of the findings for Waltz's explanation.

This problemshift, however, exhibits all four of the characteristics outlined earlier as indicative of degenerative tendencies within a research program. First, the new concept, “balance of threat,” is introduced to explain why states do not balance in the way Waltz theorizes. The balance of threat concept does not appear in Waltz (1979) or in the literature before Walt introduced it in conjunction with his findings. Second, the concept does not point to any novel facts other than the discrepant evidence. Third, therefore this new variant of realism does not have any excess empirical content compared to the original theory, except that it now takes the discrepant evidence and says it supports a new variant of realism.

These three degenerating characteristics open up the possibility that, when both the original balance of power proposition and the new balance of threat proposition ( $T$  and  $T'$ , respectively) are taken as two versions of realism, either behavior can be seen as evidence supporting realist theory (in some form) and hence the realist paradigm or approach in general. Waltz (1979, 121) allows a clear test, because bandwagoning is taken to be the opposite of balancing. Now, Walt splits the concept of balancing into two components, either one of which will support the realist paradigm (because the second is but “a refinement” of balance-of-power theory). From outside the realist paradigm, this appears as a move to dismiss discrepant evidence and explain it away by an ad hoc theoryshift. Such a move is also a degenerating shift on the basis of the fourth indicator, because it reduces the probability that the corpus of realist propositions can be falsified. Before Walt wrote, the set of empirical behavior in which states *could* engage that would be seen as evidence falsifying Waltz’s balancing proposition was much broader than it was after Walt wrote . . .

By raising the salience of the bandwagoning concept and giving an explanation of it, Walt leaves the door open to the possibility that situations similar to the experiment may occur within the research program. Through this door walks Schweller (1994), who argues in contradiction to Walt that bandwagoning is more common than balancing. From this he weaves “an alternative theory of alliances” that he labels “balance of interests,” another felicitous phrase, made even more picturesque by his habit of referring to states as jackals, wolves, lambs, and lions. Schweller (1994, 86) argues that his theory is even more realist than Waltz’s, because he bases his analysis on the assumption of the classical realists—states strive for greater power and expansion—and not on security, as Waltz (1979, 126) assumes. Waltz is misled, according to Schweller (1994, 85–8), because of his status-quo bias. If he were to look at things from the perspective of a revisionist state, he would see why they bandwagon: to gain rewards (and presumably power).

Schweller (1994, 89–92), in a cursory review of European history, questions the extent to which states have balanced and argues instead that they mostly bandwagon. To establish this claim, he redefines bandwagoning more broadly than Walt; it is no longer the opposite of balancing (i.e., siding with the actor who poses the greatest threat or has the most power) but simply any attempt to side with the stronger, especially for opportunistic gain. Because the stronger state often does not pose a direct threat to every weak state, this kind of behavior is much more common and distinct from what Walt meant.

Two things about Schweller (1994) are important for the appraisal of this research program. First, despite the vehemence of his attack on the balancing proposition, this is nowhere seen as a deficiency of the realist paradigm; rather, it is Waltz’s distortion of classical realism (however, see Morgenthau [1948] 1978, 194). The latter is technically true, in that Waltz raises the idea of balancing to the status of a law, but one would think that the absence of balancing in world politics, especially in European history, would have

some negative effect on the realist view of the world. Certainly, Schweller's "finding" that bandwagoning is more prevalent than balancing is something classical realists, such as Morgenthau ([1948] 1978), Dehio (1961), or Kissinger (1994, 20–1, 67–8, 166–7) would find very disturbing. They would not expect this to be the typical behavior of states, and if it did occur, they would see it as a failure to follow a rational foreign policy and/or to pursue a prudent realist course (see Morgenthau [1948] 1978, 7–8).

Second, and more important, Schweller's theoryshift (*T'*) has made bandwagoning a "confirming" piece of evidence for the realist paradigm. So, if he turns out to be correct, his theory, which he says is even more realist than Waltz's, will be confirmed. If he is incorrect, then Waltz's version of realism will be confirmed. Under what circumstances will the realist paradigm be considered as having failed to pass an empirical test? The field is now in a position (in this research program) where any one of the following can be taken as evidence supporting the realist paradigm: balancing of power, balancing of threat, and bandwagoning. At the same time, the paradigm as a whole has failed to specify what evidence will be accepted as falsifying it—a clear violation of Popper's (1959) principle of falsifiability. Findings revealing the absence of balancing of power and the presence of balancing of threat or bandwagoning are taken by these researchers as supporting the realist paradigm; instead, from the perspective of those outside the paradigm, these outcomes should be taken as anomalies. All their new concepts do is try to hide the anomaly through semantic labeling (see Lakatos 1970, 117, 119). Each emendation tries to salvage something but does so by moving farther and farther away from the original concept. Thus, Waltz moves from the idea of a balance of power to simply balancing power, even if it does not prevent war. Walt finds that states do not balance power but oppose threats to themselves. Schweller argues that states do not balance against the stronger but more frequently bandwagon with it to take advantage of opportunities to gain rewards.

Walt and Schweller recognize discrepant evidence and explain it away by using a balance phraseology that hides the fact the observed behavior is fundamentally different from that expected by the original theory. The field hardly needs realism to tell it that states will oppose threats to themselves (if they can) or that revisionist states will seize opportunities to gain rewards (especially if the risks are low). In addition, these new concepts do not point to any novel theoretical facts; they are not used to describe or predict any pattern or behavior other than the discrepant patterns that undercut the original theory.

Ultimately, under the fourth indicator, such theoryshifts are also degenerating because they increase the probability that the realist paradigm will pass some test, since three kinds of behavior now can be seen as confirmatory. While any one version of realism (balance of power, balancing power, balance of threats, balance of interests) may be falsified, the paradigm itself will live on and, indeed, be seen as theoretically robust. In fact, the protean character of realism prevents the paradigm from being falsified because as soon as one theoretical variant is discarded, another variant pops up to replace it as the "true realism" or the "new realism" . . .

### ***Buck-passing and chain-ganging***

The bandwagoning research program is not the only way in which the protean character of realism has been revealed. Another and perhaps even more powerful example is the way in which Christensen and Snyder (1990) have dealt with the failure of states to balance. They begin by criticizing Waltz for being too parsimonious and making indeterminate predictions about balancing under multipolarity. They then seek to correct this defect within

realism, by specifying that states will engage in chain-ganging or buck-passing depending on the perceived balance between offense and defense. Chain-ganging occurs when states, especially strong states, commit “themselves unconditionally to reckless allies whose survival is seen to be indispensable to the maintenance of the balance”; buck-passing is a failure to balance and reliance on “third parties to bear the costs of stopping a rising hegemon” (Christensen and Snyder 1990, 138). The alliance pattern that led to World War I is given as an example of chain-ganging, and Europe in the 1930s is given as an example of buck-passing. The propositions are applied only to multipolarity; in bipolarity, balancing is seen as unproblematic.

This article is another example of how the realist paradigm (since Waltz) has been articulated in a normal science fashion. The authors find a gap in Waltz’s explanation and try to correct it by bringing in a variable from Jervis (1978; see also Van Evera 1984). This gives the impression of cumulation and progress through further specification, especially since they have come up with a fancy title for labeling what Waltz identified as possible sources of instability in multipolarity.

A closer inspection reveals the degenerating character of their emendation. The argument that states will either engage in buck-passing or chain-ganging under multipolarity is an admission that in important instances, such as the 1930s, states fail to balance the way Waltz (1979) says they must because of the system’s structure. Recall Waltz’s (1979, 121) clear prediction that “balance-of-power politics will prevail wherever two, and only two, requirements are met: anarchy and units wishing to survive.” Surely, these requirements were met in the period before World War II, and therefore failure to balance should be taken as falsifying evidence.

Christensen and Snyder (1990) seem to want to explain away the 1930s, in which they argue there was a great deal of buck-passing. Waltz (1979, 164–5, 167), however, never says that states will not conform overall to the law of balancing in multipolarity, only that there are more “difficulties” in doing so. If Christensen and Snyder see the 1930s as a failure to balance properly, then this is an anomaly that needs to be explained away. The buck-passing/chain-ganging concept does that in a rhetorical flourish that grabs attention and seems persuasive. Yet, it “rescues” the theory not simply from indeterminate predictions, as Christensen and Snyder (1990, 146) put it, but explains away a critical case that the theory should have predicted.

This seems to be especially important because, contrary to what Waltz and Christensen and Snyder postulate, balancing through alliances should be more feasible under multipolarity than bipolarity, because under the latter there simply are not any other major states with whom to align. Thus, Waltz (1979, 168) says that under bipolarity *internal* balancing is more predominant and precise than external balancing. If under bipolarity there is, according to Waltz, a tendency to balance (internally, i.e., through military buildups), and under multipolarity there is, according to Christensen and Snyder, a tendency to pass the buck or chain-gang, then when exactly do we get the kind of alliance balancing that we attribute to the traditional balance of power Waltz has decreed as a law? Christensen and Snyder’s analysis appears as a “proteanshift” in realism that permits the paradigm to be confirmed if states balance (internally or externally), chain-gang, or buck-pass (as well as bandwagon, see Schweller 1994). This is degenerative under the fourth indicator because the probability of falsification decreases to a very low level. It seems to increase greatly the probability that empirical tests will be passed by some form of realism.<sup>4</sup>

Imprecise measurement leaving open the possibility for ad hoc interpretation is also a problem with identifying buck-passing and chain-ganging. Were Britain, France, and the



USSR passing the buck in the late 1930s, or were they just slow to balance? Or were Britain and France pursuing an entirely different strategy, appeasement, because of the lessons they derived from World War I? If the latter, which seems more plausible, then buck-passing is not involved at all, and the factor explaining alliance behavior is not multipolarity but an entirely different variable (see Rosecrance and Steiner 1993). What is even more troubling is that while Christensen and Snyder (1990) see pre-1939 as buck-passing and pre-1914 as chain-ganging, it seems that Britain was much more hesitant to enter the war in 1914 than in 1939, contrary to what one would expect given the logic of Christensen and Snyder's historical analysis.<sup>5</sup> After Hitler took Prague in March 1939, domestic public and elite opinion moved toward a commitment to war (Rosecrance and Steiner 1993, 140), but in 1914 that commitment never came before the outbreak of hostilities (see Levy 1990/91). The cabinet was split, and only the violation of Belgium tipped the balance. Thus, the introduction of the new refinement is far from a clear or unproblematic solution to the anomaly on its own terms.

The refinements of Waltz produced by the literature on bandwagoning and buck-passing are degenerating because they hide, rather than deal directly with, the seriousness of the anomalies they are trying to handle. A theory whose main purpose is to explain balancing cannot stand if balancing is not the law it says it is. Such an anomaly also reflects negatively on the paradigm as a whole. Even though Morgenthau ([1948] 1978, chapter 14) did not think the balance of power was very workable, power variables are part of the central core of his work, and he does say that the balance of power is "a natural and inevitable outgrowth of the struggle of power" and "a protective device of an alliance of nations, anxious for their independence, against another nation's designs for world domination" (Morgenthau [1948] 1978, 194, and see 173, 195–6). Waltz's (1979) theory, which has been characterized as a systematization of classical realism (Keohane 1986, 15) and widely seen as such, cannot fail on one of its few concrete predictions without reflecting badly (in some sense) on the larger paradigm in which it is embedded . . .

### **Where do we go from here?**

If one accepts the general thrust of the analysis that the neotraditional research program on balancing has been degenerating, then the question that needs to be discussed further is the implications of this for the wider paradigm. Two obvious conclusions are possible. A narrow and more conservative conclusion would try to preserve as much of the dominant paradigm as possible in face of discrepant evidence. A broader and more radical conclusion would take failure in this one research program as consistent with the assessments of other studies and thus as an indicator of a deeper, broader problem. It is not really necessary that one conclusion rather than the other be taken by the entire field, since what is at stake here are the research bets individuals are willing to take with their own time and effort. In this light, it is only necessary to outline the implications of the two different conclusions.

The narrow conclusion is that Waltz's attempt to explain what he regards as the major behavioral regularity of international politics was premature because states simply do not engage in balancing with the kind of regularity that he assumes. It is the failure of neotraditional researchers and historians to establish clearly the empirical accuracy of Waltz's balancing proposition that so hurts his theory. If the logical connection between anarchy (as a systemic structure) and balancing is what Waltz claims it to be, and states do not engage in balancing, then this empirical anomaly must indicate some theoretical deficiency.

The neotraditional approach to date has muted the implications of the evidence by bringing to bear new concepts. The argument presented here is that such changes are primarily semantic and more clearly conform to what Lakatos calls degenerating theoryshifts than to progressive theoryshifts. If this is accepted, then at minimum one would draw the narrow conservative conclusion that the discrepant evidence (until further research demonstrates otherwise) is showing that states do not balance in the way Waltz assumes they do. Realists then can concentrate on other research programs within the paradigm without being susceptible (at least on the basis of this analysis) to the charge of engaging in a degenerating research program. Those who continue to mine realist inquiry, however, should pay more attention to the problem of degeneration in making theoretical reformulations of realism. Specifically, scholars making theoryshifts in realism should take care to ensure that these are not just protean shifts.

The implication of the broader and more radical conclusion is to ask why a concept so long associated with realism should do so poorly and so misguide so many theorists. Could not its failure to pass neotraditional and historical “testing” (or investigation) be an indicator of the distorted view of world politics that the paradigm imposes on scholars? Such questions are reasonable to ask, especially in light of appraisals that have found other aspects of realism wanting (see Lebow and Risse-Kappen 1995, Rosecrance and Stein 1993, Vasquez 1983), but they are not the same as logically compelling conclusions that can be derived from the analysis herein. It has been shown only that one major research program, which has commanded a great deal of interest, seems to be exhibiting a degenerating tendency.

Such a demonstration is important in its own right, particularly if analysts are unaware of the collective effect of their individual decisions. In addition, it shows that what admirers of the realist paradigm have often taken as theoretical fertility and a continuing ability to provide new insights is not that at all, but a degenerating process of reformulating itself in light of discrepant evidence.

Regardless of whether a narrow or broad conclusion is accepted, this analysis has shown that the field needs much more rigor in the interparadigm debate. Only by being more rigorous both in testing the dominant paradigm and in building a new one that can explain the growing body of counterevidence as well as produce new nonobvious findings of its own will progress be made.

## Notes

- 1 For Waltz (1979, 126), bandwagoning is allying with the strongest power, that is, the one capable of establishing hegemony. He maintains that such an alignment will be dangerous to the survival of states. Walt (1987, 17, 21–2) defines the term similarly but introduces the notion of threat: “*Balancing* is defined as allying with others against the prevailing threat; *bandwagoning* refers to alignment with the source of danger” (italics in original).
- 2 Walt (1987, 172) concludes: “The main point should be obvious: balance of threat theory is superior to balance of power theory. Examining the impact of several related but distinct sources of threat can provide a more persuasive account of alliance formation than can focusing solely on the distribution of aggregate capabilities.”
- 3 Schroeder (1994a and b) provides this devastating evidence on Europe (see also Schweller 1994, 89–92).
- 4 Of course, one may argue that Christensen and Snyder’s (1994) [error in original. Date should read 1990] proposition on offense–defense is falsifiable in principle, and that is true, but this points out another problem with their analysis: namely, Levy (1984) is unable to distinguish in specific historical periods whether offense or defense has the advantage (see Christensen and Snyder 1990,

- 139, 6 and 7). They, in turn, rely on the perception of offense and defense, but such a "belief" variable takes us away from realism and toward a more psychological-cognitive paradigm.
- 5 Christensen and Snyder (1990, 156) recognize British buck-passing in 1914, but they say Britain was an outlier and "did not entirely pass the buck."

## References

- Banks, Michael. "The Inter-Paradigm Debate." In *A Handbook of Current Theory*, edited by Margot Light and A. J. R. Groom. London: Frances Pinter, 1985.
- Bueno de Mesquita, Bruce. "Risk, Power Distributions, and the Likelihood of War." *International Studies Quarterly* 25 (December 1981): 541–68.
- Christensen, Thomas J., and Jack Snyder. "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity." *International Organization* 44 (Spring 1990): 137–68.
- Claude, Inis L., Jr. *Power and International Relations*. New York: Random House, 1962.
- Dehio, Ludwig. *The Precarious Balance*. New York: Vintage, 1961.
- Gulick, Edward Vose. *Europe's Classical Balance of Power*. New York: Norton, 1955.
- Haas, Ernst B. "The Balance of Power: Prescription, Concept, or Propaganda" *World Politics* 5 (April 1953): 442–77.
- Jervis, Robert. "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma." *World Politics* 30 (January 1978): 167–214.
- Keohane, Robert O. "Realism, Neorealism and the Study of World Politics." In *Neorealism and Its Critics*, edited by Robert O. Keohane. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.
- Kissinger, Henry. *Diplomacy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.
- Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1962] 1970.
- Lakatos, Imre. "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes." In *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, edited by Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.
- Lebow, Richard Ned, and Thomas Risse-Kappen, eds. *International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.
- Levy, Jack S. "The Offensive/Defensive Balance of Military Technology: A Theoretical and Historical Analysis." *International Studies Quarterly* 28 (June 1984): 219–38.
- . "Preferences, Constraints, and Choices in July 1914." *International Security* 15 (Winter 1990/91): 151–86.
- Levy, Jack S., and Michael N. Barnett. "Domestic Sources of Alliances and Alignments: The Case of Egypt, 1962–1973." *International Organization* 45 (Summer 1991): 369–95.
- Morgenthau, Hans J. *Politics among Nations*. 5th rev. ed. New York: Knopf, [1948] 1978.
- Organski, A. F. K. *World Politics*. New York: Knopf, 1958.
- Popper, Karl. *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. London: Hutchinson, 1959.
- Rosecrance, Richard, and Arthur Stein, eds. *The Domestic Bases of Grand Strategy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993.
- Rosecrance, Richard, and Zara Steiner. "British Grand Strategy and the Origins of World War II." In *The Domestic Bases of Grand Strategy*, edited by Richard Rosecrance and Arthur Stein. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993.
- Schroeder, Paul W. "Historical Reality vs. Neo-realist Theory." *International Security* 19 (Summer 1994a): 108–48.
- . *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763–1848*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994b.
- Schweller, Randall L. "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In." *International Security* 19 (Summer 1994): 72–107.
- Singer, J. David, Stuart Bremer, and John Stuckey. "Capability Distribution, Uncertainty, and Major Power War, 1820–1965." In *Peace, War and Numbers*, edited by Bruce Russett. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1972.

- Smith, Steve. "The Self-Images of a Discipline: A Genealogy of International Relations Theory." In *International Relations Theory Today*, edited by Ken Booth and Steve Smith. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1995.
- Van Evera, Stephen. "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War." *International Security* 9 (Summer 1984): 58–107.
- Vasquez, John A. *The Power of Power Politics: A Critique*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983.
- Walt, Stephen M. *The Origins of Alliances*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987.
- Waltz, Kenneth N. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979.

# Evaluating theories

*Kenneth N. Waltz*

From: *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (December 1997): 913–17.

Having previously covered the criticisms John Vasquez makes (see especially Waltz 1979, 1986), I respond to his article reluctantly. One is, however, always tempted to try again.

Following Lakatos (1970), albeit shakily, in moving from paradigms to theories to research programs, Vasquez says he places theories in a single paradigm if they “share certain fundamental assumptions” (p. 900). He thereupon lumps old and new realists together in one realist paradigm. This is odd since, as he recognizes, old and new realists work from different basic assumptions. Believing that states strive for ever more power, Hans Morgenthau took power to be an end in itself. In contrast, I built structural theory on the assumption that survival is the goal of states and that power is one of the means to that end. Political scientists generally work from two different paradigms: one behavioral, the other systemic. Old realists see causes as running directly from states to the outcomes their actions produce. New realists see states forming a structure by their interactions and then being strongly affected by the structure their interactions have formed. Old realists account for political outcomes mainly by analyzing differences among states; new realists show why states tend to become like units as they try to coexist in a self-help system, with behaviors and outcomes explained by differences in the positions of states as well as by their internal characteristics (see Waltz 1990). If the term “paradigm” means anything at all, it cannot accommodate such fundamental differences.

Vasquez puts old and new realists in the same pot because he misunderstands realists. He makes odd statements about what paradigms do because he misunderstands paradigms. He believes that paradigms easily generate a family of theories (p. 900). Paradigms are apparently like sausage machines: Turn the crank, and theories come out. Yet no one in any field is able to generate theories easily or even to say how to go about creating them.

Vasquez finds lots of realist theories because he defines theories loosely as “inter-related propositions purporting to explain behavior” (footnote 3). If inter-relating propositions were all it took to make theories, then, of course, we would have many of them. I can, however, think of any number of propositions purporting to explain something that would not qualify as theories by any useful definition of the term. I define theory as a picture, mentally formed, of a bounded realm or domain of activity. A theory depicts the organization of a realm and the connections among its parts. The infinite materials of any realm can be organized in endlessly different ways. Reality is complex; theory is simple. By simplification, theories lay bare the essential elements in play and indicate necessary relations of cause and interdependency—or suggest where to look for them (see Waltz 1979, 1–13). Vasquez, following his definition, finds many theories; I find few.

Vasquez’s belief that theories are plentiful and easy to produce reflects the positivist tradition that permeates American political science. At the extreme, positivists believe that

reality can be apprehended directly, without benefit of theory. Reality is whatever we directly observe. In a more moderate version of positivism, theory is but one step removed from reality, is arrived at largely by induction, is rather easy to construct, and is fairly easy to test. In their book on interdependence, Keohane and Nye provide a clear example when they “argue that complex interdependence sometimes comes closer to reality than does realism” (1989, 23). Yet, if we knew what reality is, theory would serve no purpose. Statements such as “parsimony is a judgment . . . about the nature of the world: it is assumed to be simple,” neatly express the idea that theory does little more than mirror reality (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 20).

Faced with an infinite number of “facts” one must wonder, however, which ones are to be taken as pertinent when trying to explain something. As the molecular biologist Gunther Stent has put it: “Reality is constructed by the mind . . . the recognition of structures is nothing else than the selective destruction of information” (1973, E17). Scientists and philosophers of science refer to facts as being “theory laden” and to theory and fact as being “interdependent.” “Every fact,” as Goethe nicely put it, “is already a theory.” Theory, rather than being a mirror in which reality is reflected, is an instrument to be used in attempting to explain a circumscribed part of a reality of whose true dimensions we can never be sure. The instrument is of no use if it does little more than ape the complexity of the world. To say that a “theory should be just as complicated as all our evidence suggests” (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 20) amounts to a renunciation of science from Galileo onward.

Because of the interdependence of theory and fact, the construction and testing of theories is a more problematic task than most political scientists have thought. Understanding this, Lakatos rejected “dogmatic falsification” in favor of judging theories by the fruitfulness of the research programs they may spawn. Following Lakatos, Vasquez faults the realist paradigm for what he takes to be the regressive quality of its research program. Forsaking Lakatos, he then adduces evidence that in his view falsifies balance-of-power theory in its structural-realist form. I shall consider both claims.

I disagree with Lakatos on some points, but not on his rejection of the notion that tests can falsify theories. To explain why falsification won’t do, I all too briefly mention two problems. First, proving something false requires proving something else true. Yet the facts against which we test theories are themselves problematic. As Lakatos rightly says, in italics, “*theories are not only equally unprovable, . . . they are also equally undisprovable*” (1970, 103; cf. Harris 1970, 353). Among natural scientists, falsification is a little used method (Bochenski 1965, 109; cf. Harris 1970). Social scientists should think about why this is so.

Second, citing Popper (1959), Vasquez insists that “paradigms” should specify the evidence that would disprove them and criticizes realism for not doing so (p. 905). In contrast, Lakatos observes that “*the most admired scientific theories simply fail to forbid any observable state of affairs*” (1970, 100, his italics). This is true for many reasons. Lakatos himself points out that we always evaluate theories with a *ceteris paribus* clause implied, and we can never be sure that it holds. To express the same thought in different words, scientific theories deal in idealizations. If the results of scientific experiments are carried to enough decimal points, hypotheses inferred from theories are always proved wrong. As the Nobel Laureate in physics, Steven Weinberg, puts it: “There is no theory that is not contradicted by some experiment” (1992, 93). Ernst Nagel (1961, 460–6, 505–9) expressed a similar thought when he pointed out that social-science predictions fail because social scientists do not deal in idealizations. It is because falsification is untenable that Lakatos proposes that we evaluate theories by the fruitfulness of their research programs. Ultimately,



he concludes, as others had earlier, that a theory is overthrown only by a better theory (p. 119; cf. Conant 1947, 48).

Despite claiming to follow Lakatos's advice to evaluate theories through their research programs, Vasquez emphasizes what he takes to be evidence falsifying balance-of-power theory. According to him, the historian Paul Schroeder (1994) has presented "devastating evidence" against it. One must understand, however, what a theory claims to explain before attempting to test it. Early in his piece, Schroeder (p. 109) draws a picture of neorealism's logic. All of his arrows run in one direction, from the system downward. Realizing that many people have trouble understanding theory, I drew a few pictures myself. Figure 1 depicts one of them (Waltz 1979, 40). Structural theory emphasizes that causation runs from structures to states *and* from states to structure. It also explains, among other things, why balances of power recurrently form. Schroeder rejects structural theory because it fails to account for the motives of statesmen. Yet, as William Graham Sumner wrote: "Motives from which men act have nothing at all to do with the consequences of their action" ([1911] 1968, 212). I would say "little" rather than "nothing," but the point is clear, and structural theory explains why it holds. What Vasquez takes to be Schroeder's "devastating evidence" turns out to be a melange of irrelevant diplomatic lore. Like Vasquez, Schroeder ignores the basic injunction that theories be judged by what they claim to explain. Moreover, both fail to notice that Morgenthau's understanding of balances of power differs fundamentally from mine. For Morgenthau, balances are intended and must be sought by the statesmen who produce them. For me, balances are produced whether or not intended. Schroeder's "evidence" may apply to Morgenthau's ideas about balances of power; it does not apply to mine. This again shows how misleading it is to place all realists in a single paradigm.

Vasquez and Schroeder note that power is often out of balance. Is structural theory invalidated because the actions of states sometimes fail to bring their system into balance? In answering this question, it is helpful to think of similar problems in economics. Classical economic theory holds that, in the absence of governmental intervention, competitive economies tend toward equilibrium at full employment of the factors of production. Yet one rarely finds an economy in equilibrium. Further, theory leads one to expect that competition will lead to a similarity of products as well as of prices. Illustrating the result, Harold Hotelling (1929) pointed out that autos, furniture, cider, churches, and political parties become much like one another. But a tendency toward the sameness of products may not be apparent at a given moment, for a competitor may successfully outflank its rivals by offering a design that breaks the mold. Do economies in disequilibrium and variations in product design cast doubt on hypotheses inferred from theories of competition? Hardly. Economic theory predicts strong and persistent tendencies rather than particular states or conditions. Similarly, no contradiction exists between saying that international political systems tend strongly *toward* balance but are seldom *in* balance.

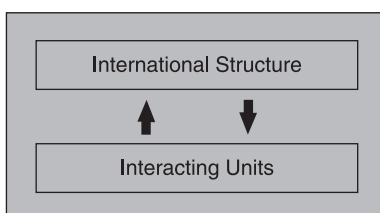


Figure 1

Vasquez's attempt to apply Lakatos's ideas about research programs to balance-of-power theory is as unsuccessful as his attempt to adduce evidence that would falsify it. Lakatos defines a series of theories as progressive "if each new theory has some excess empirical content over its predecessor, that is, if it predicts some novel, hitherto unexpected facts" (1970, 116). Newtonian science is a wonderful example of a progressive series of theories, incorporating the same basic assumptions about the universe in theories covering successively more phenomena. Classical economics, able to explain the working of national and of international economies as well, is another example. In international politics, where can one find such a use of fundamental concepts to develop theories covering ever more phenomena? Vasquez claims to find several, but his claim rests sometimes on placing in a single realist program work that belongs in different ones, and sometimes on taking work done when applying a theory as being the creation of a new one.

One cannot judge the fertility of a research program by evaluating work done outside of it. Vasquez takes Randall Schweller's (1994) essay on bandwagoning as work done within the realist paradigm and argues that it provides an example of its degeneration. Schweller, however, sets out to show that the central theory of neorealism is wrong. He rejects neorealism's assumptions about power as a means and survival as the goal of states in favor of Morgenthau's assumption that states seek ever more power. He claims to show that bandwagoning is more common than balancing, believing that if it is, then neorealist theory fails. Schweller and I work within different research programs. The question therefore shifts from the quality of the program to whether his claims about bandwagoning invalidate structural theory.

Structural theory assumes that the dominant goal of states is security, since to pursue whatever other goals they may have, they first must survive. Bandwagoning and balancing by the logic of the theory are opposite responses of security-seeking states to their situations. States concerned for their security value relative gains over absolute ones. At the extremes, however, with very secure or very insecure states, the quest for absolute gains may prevail over the quest for relative ones. Very weak states cannot make themselves secure by their own efforts. Whatever the risks, their main chance may be to jump on a bandwagon pulled by stronger states. Other states may have a choice between joining a stronger state and balancing against it, and they may make the wrong one. States sometimes blunder when trying to respond sensibly to both internal and external pressures. Morgenthau once compared a statesman not believing in the balance of power to a scientist not believing in the law of gravity. Laws can be broken, but breaking them risks punishment. One who violates the law of gravity by stepping from a nineteenth-story window will suffer instant and condign punishment. A state that bandwagons when the situation calls for balancing runs risks, as Mussolini's Italy discovered after it jumped on Hitler's bandwagon, although in international politics punishment may not be swift and sure. By joining the stronger side, Italy became Germany's junior partner, and Mussolini lost control of his policy. Bandwagoning by some states strengthened Germany and encouraged Hitler to further conquest. Only balancing in the middle and later 1930s could have stopped him. Various states, including Italy, paid a great price for their failure to balance earlier. Theory does not direct the policies of states; it does describe their expected consequences.

States' actions are not determined by structure. Rather, as I have said before, structures shape and shove; they encourage states to do some things and to refrain from doing others. Because states coexist in a self-help system, they are free to do any fool thing they care to, but they are likely to be rewarded for behavior that is responsive to structural pressures and punished for behavior that is not.

Vasquez requires that theories predict, since prediction seems to make falsification possible. He therefore seizes upon Schweller's claim that bandwagoning is more common than balancing. Whether this looks like falsifying evidence depends on what is predicted. Like classical economic theory, balance-of-power theory does not say that a system will be in equilibrium most or even much of the time. Instead, it predicts that, willy nilly, balances will form over time. That, Vasquez would no doubt say, is not much of a prediction. Yet Charles Kegley (1993, 139) has sensibly remarked that if a multipolar system emerges from the present unipolar one, realism will be vindicated. Seldom in international politics do signs of vindication appear so quickly. Multipolarity is developing before our eyes: To all but the myopic, it can already be seen on the horizon. Moreover, it is emerging in accordance with the balancing imperative.

In the light of structural theory, unipolarity appears as the least stable of international configurations. Unlikely though it is, a dominant power may behave with moderation, restraint, and forbearance. Even if it does, however, weaker states will worry about its future behavior. America's founding fathers warned against the perils of power in the absence of checks and balances. Is unbalanced power less of a danger in international than in national politics? Some countries will not want to bet that it is. As nature abhors a vacuum, so international politics abhors unbalanced power. Faced by unbalanced power, states try to increase their own strength or they ally with others to bring the international distribution of power into balance. The reactions of other states to the drive for dominance of Charles I of Spain, of Louis XIV and Napoleon Bonaparte of France, of Wilhelm II and Adolph Hitler of Germany, illustrate the point.

Will the preponderant power of the United States elicit similar reactions? Unbalanced power, whoever wields it, is a potential danger to others. The powerful state may, and the United States does, think of itself as acting for the sake of peace, justice, and well-being in the world. These terms, however, will be defined to the liking of the powerful, which may conflict with the preferences and interests of others. The powerful state will at times act in ways that appear arbitrary and high handed to others, who will smart under the unfair treatment they believe they are receiving. Some of the weaker states in the system will therefore act to restore a balance and thus move the system back to bi- or multipolarity. China and Japan are doing so now.

In international politics, overwhelming power repels and leads others to balance against it. Stephen Walt (1987, viii, 5, 21, 263–5) has offered a reformulation of balance-of-power theory, believing that states balance not against power but against threat. Vasquez sees Walt's "refinement" as placing a semantic patch on the original theory in an attempt to rescue it from falsifying evidence. I would agree if I took Walt's reformulation to be the correction of a concept that increases the explanatory power of a defective theory and makes it more precise. Changing the concepts of a theory, however, makes an old theory into a new one that has to be evaluated in its own right. I see "balance of threat" not as the name of a new theory but as part of a description of how makers of foreign policy think when making alliance decisions. Theory is an instrument. The empirical material on which it is to be used is not found in the instrument; it has to be adduced by the person using it. Walt makes this clear when he describes "threat" as one of the "factors that statesmen consider when deciding with whom to ally" (p. 21). In moving from international-political *theory* to foreign-policy *application* one has to consider such matters as statesmen's assessments of threats, but they do not thereby become part of the theory. Forcing more empirical content into a theory would truly amount to a "regressive theory shift." It would turn a general theory into a particular explanation. Vasquez, and

Walt, have unfortunately taken the imaginative application of a theory to be the creation of a new one.

Vasquez makes a similar mistake in his appraisal of Christensen's and Snyder's (1990) essay, "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks." "The authors," according to Vasquez, "find a gap in Waltz's explanation [of European diplomacy preceding World War II] and try to correct it by bringing in a variable from Jervis" (p. 906). However good or bad my brief explanation of what happened in Europe prior to World War II may be (Waltz 1979, 164–70), an explanation is not a theory. A theory does not provide an account of what has happened or of what may happen. Just as a hammer becomes a useful tool when nails and wood are available, so a theory becomes useful in devising an explanation of events when combined with information about them.

The question is not what should be included in an account of foreign policies but what can be included in a theory of international politics. A theory is not a mere collection of variables. If a "gap" is found in a theory, it cannot be plugged by adding a "variable" to it. To add to a theory something that one believes has been omitted requires showing how it can take its place as one element of a coherent and effective theory. If that were easy to do, we would be blessed with a wealth of strong and comprehensive theories.

I conclude by emphasizing a few points about the testing of theories. A theory's ability to explain is more important than its ability to predict. At least Steven Weinberg and many others think so. Believing that scientists will one day come up with a final theory, he writes that even then we will not be able "to predict everything or even very much," but, he adds, we will be able to understand why things "work the way they do" (1992, 45; cf. Toulmin 1961, 36–8). Success in explaining, not in predicting, is the ultimate criterion of good theory. Theories of evolution, after all, predict nothing in particular.

Vasquez makes the testing of theories seem easy by adopting a positivist standard: Does the observation made correspond with a theory's prediction? His adoption of such a standard is shown by his crisp assertion that the failure of states to balance "in the period before World War II . . . should be taken as falsifying evidence" (p. 906). Yet what is to be taken as evidence for or against a theory is always in question. Some attempts to balance were made in the prewar years, but a balance formed, so to speak, only in the end. Should delay in completing a balance be taken as evidence contradicting balance-of-power theory? One may not be able to answer the question decisively. Testing theories is an uncertain business. In this case, however, one should certainly remember that the theory being tested explains the process of balancing as well as predicting that balances recurrently form. The theory cannot say how long the process will take.

The title of Errol Harris's (1970) book, *Hypothesis and Perception*, implies a criticism of Popper's claim that a critical test of a hypothesis, if flunked, falsifies a theory once and for all. As Harris suggests, our perceptions count; the results of tests require interpretation. Evaluating a theory requires working back and forth between the implications of the theory and an uncertain state of affairs that we take to be the reality against which the theory is tested. Whether or not events in the 1930s tend to validate or to falsify my version of balance-of-power theory depends as much on how one interprets the theory as on what happened. However thorough the evaluation of a theory, we can never say for sure that the theory is true. All the more, then, we should test a theory in all of the ways we can think of—by trying to falsify and to confirm it, by seeing whether things work in the way the theory suggests, and by comparing events in arenas of similar structure to see if they follow similar patterns. Weinberg suggests yet another way. "The most important thing for the progress of physics," he writes, "is not the decision that a theory is true, but the decision that it is worth taking

seriously" (1992, 103). The structural theory set forth in my *Theory of International Politics* at least passes that test.

## References

- Bochenski, J. M. *The Methods of Contemporary Thought*, trans. Peter Caws. Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing, 1965.
- Christensen, Thomas, J., and Jack Snyder. "Chained Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity." *International Organization* 44 (Spring 1990): 137–68.
- Conant, James B. *On Understanding Science*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1947.
- Harris, Errol E. *Hypothesis and Perception*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1970.
- Hotelling, Harold. "Stability in Competition." *Economic Journal* 39 (March 1929): 41–57.
- Kegley, Charles W., Jr. "The Neoidealist Moment in International Studies? Realist Myths and the New International Realities." *International Studies Quarterly* 37 (June 1993): 131–46.
- Keohane, Robert O., and Joseph S. Nye. *Power and Interdependence*, 2d ed. New York: Harper Collins, 1989.
- King, Gary, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba. *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994.
- Lakatos, Imre. "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes." In *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, edited by Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.
- Nagel, Ernst. *The Structure of Science: Problems in the Logic of Scientific Exploration*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961.
- Popper, Karl R. *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. London: Hutchinson, 1959.
- Schroeder, Paul. "Historical Reality vs. Neo-Realist Theory." *International Security* 19 (Summer 1994): 108–48.
- Schweller, Randall L. "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In." *International Security* 19 (Summer 1994): 72–107.
- Stent, Gunther S. "Shakespeare and DNA." *New York Times*, January 28, sec. E, 1973.
- Sumner, William Graham. "War." In *War: Studies from Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology*, edited by Leon Bramson and George W. Goethals. New York: Basic Books, [1911] 1968.
- Toulmin, Stephen. *Foresight and Understanding: An Enquiry into the Aims of Science*. New York: Harper and Row, 1961.
- Vasquez, John A. "The Realist Paradigm and Degenerative versus Progressive Research Programs: An Appraisal of Neotraditional Research on Waltz's Balancing Proposition." *American Political Science Review* 91 (December 1997): 899–912.
- Walt, Stephen M. *The Origins of Alliances*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987.
- Waltz, Kenneth N. *Theory of International Politics*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1979.
- . "Reflections on *Theory of International Politics*: Response to My Critics." In *Neorealism and Its Critics*, edited by Robert O. Keohane. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.
- . "Realist Thought and Neorealist Theory." *Journal of International Affairs* 44 (Spring/Summer 1990): 21–37.
- . "The Emerging Structure of International Politics." *International Security* 17 (Fall 1993): 44–79.
- Weinberg, Steven. *Dreams of a Final Theory*. New York: Pantheon Books: 1992.

# The progressive power of realism

*Stephen M. Walt*

From: *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (December 1997): 931–5.

John Vasquez's evaluation of the realist research program is a misstep on the road to better international relations theory. By portraying realism as "degenerating," Vasquez hopes to influence both "individual decisions about where scholars are willing to place their research bets, *as well as collective decisions as to which research programs deserve continued funding, publication, and so forth*" (p. 900, emphasis added). In other words, his main goal is to discredit realism as a legitimate approach to the study of world politics, discourage scholars from pursuing a realist research agenda, and make it less likely that scholars working in the realist tradition will receive research funds or access to prominent journals . . .

Influenced by the Lakatosian model, Vasquez portrays realism as a narrow, tightly unified research program that is exhibiting clear signs of degeneration. After describing what he takes to be realism's hard core, he argues that recent theoretical refinements are merely ad hoc adjustments designed to rescue the entire paradigm from its purported empirical failings. He does this by showing that a handful of realists have advanced different theories about alliance formation. Vasquez sees these disagreements as a symptom of degeneration, because the presence of several competing realist theories increases "the probability that the realist paradigm will pass some test" (p. 906) . . .

## What is realism?

Vasquez appears to regard realism as a single, tightly unified research program, centered around the ideas of Kenneth Waltz. This view leads him to see any major disagreement among realists—and especially any departure from Waltz—as a sign of degeneration, which in turn leads him to portray other realists as trying to salvage the larger paradigm through a series of ad hoc amendments. This perspective also allows him to count the discrediting of any particular realist theory as a blow against the entire paradigm.

Vasquez's view rests on an inaccurate picture of contemporary realist thought. In fact, realism is a broad research program that contains a host of competing theories. Realists begin with some general assumptions (such as states are the key actors, the international system is anarchic, power is central to political life).<sup>1</sup> As with all successful research programs, however, realists also disagree about a host of fundamental ideas. For example, Hans Morgenthau assumes that competition between states arises from the human lust for power (which he termed the *animus dominandi*), while Kenneth Waltz ignores human nature and assumes that states merely aim to survive (Morgenthau 1946, Waltz 1979). "Offensive" realists, such as Mearsheimer (1994–95), argue that great powers seek to maximize security by maximizing their relative power, while "defensive" realists, such as Jack Snyder (1991)



or Charles Glaser (1994–95), argue that great powers are generally more secure when they refrain from power maximization and seek to defend the status quo. Realists also disagree about the relative importance of domestic versus systems-level causes, the relative stability of bipolar versus multipolar worlds, and the importance of intentions in shaping the calculations of national leaders (to name but a few possibilities). Thus, far from being a narrow intellectual monolith, realism is a large and diverse body of thought whose proponents share a few important ideas but disagree about many others.<sup>2</sup>

Two implications follow. First, it is hardly evidence of degeneration when realists advance contradictory arguments or reach different conclusions, just as it is not a major issue whenever neo-Keynesian economists, Skinnerian psychologists, Darwinian sociobiologists, or quantum physicists are at loggerheads. There are a host of competing theories within the realist paradigm, and not all of them are going to be equally valid or useful. Second, the failure of a particular realist theory does not discredit the entire paradigm, especially since realism deals with a very wide variety of international phenomena. Vasquez focuses on a handful of authors in his attempt to discredit the entire approach, but this step mischaracterizes the broader research tradition and the many different theories it contains.<sup>3</sup>

The real question to ask is whether realism—with all its limitations—has advanced or impeded our understanding of international relations. On this issue, even well-known critics of realism concede that it has been an influential tradition precisely because it sheds considerable, if only partial, light on a number of important international phenomena (Keohane 1984, 1986; Ruggie, 1983; Wendt n.d.).<sup>4</sup>

### **Power, threat, and empirical content**

The problems with Vasquez's analysis are evident in his discussion of my own work. To begin with, he cannot make up his mind about the theoretical status of balance-of-threat theory. He begins by portraying my theory as a direct refutation of Waltz's neorealist balance-of-power theory, based on my assertion that states tend to balance against *threats* rather than against power alone. In his view, this challenge to Waltz has “devastating” consequences for the realist paradigm. As Vasquez puts it, “if . . . power and threat are independent, as they are perceived to be by the states in Walt's sample, then something may be awry in the realist world” (p. 904).

Yet, it is hardly clear why refuting Waltz would lead us to abandon the realist paradigm *in toto*. Vasquez clearly regards my work as part of the realist paradigm, so if I have correctly refuted Waltz, then realism is a progressive program after all. To avoid this obvious challenge to his argument, Vasquez reverses course and argues that balance of threat theory is merely a “felicitous phrase” that “makes states' behavior appear much more consistent with the larger paradigm than it actually is.” In particular, he claims my theory “does not point to any novel facts other than the discrepant evidence [and] . . . does not have any excess empirical content compared to the original theory, except that it now takes the discrepant evidence and says it supports a new variant of realism” (pp. 904–5). In short, Vasquez begins by calling balance-of-threat theory a “devastating” challenge to Waltz, based on the claim that power and threat are wholly independent concepts. But he quickly backtracks to argue that balance-of-threat theory is merely a semantic repackaging of Waltz's theory that does not point to any novel facts. He cannot have it both ways.

As it turns out, both assertions are incorrect. With respect to the first, I do not see power and threat as independent. Balance-of-threat theory openly incorporates power, subsuming it (along with geography, offensive capabilities, and intentions) within the more general

concept of *threat*.<sup>5</sup> Balance-of-power theory predicts that states will ally against the *strongest* state in the system, but balance-of-threat theory predicts they will tend to ally against the most *threatening*. Thus, the latter can explain not only why a state may align against the strongest power (if its power makes it the most dangerous) but also why one state may balance against another state which is not necessarily the strongest but which is seen as more threatening on account of its proximity, aggressive intentions, or acquisition of especially potent means of conquest. The two theories are not the same, although they share certain elements.

With respect to the second assertion that balance-of-threat theory is merely a semantic repackaging, I point to several of my works that offer novel facts. Balance-of-threat theory was originally laid out in my 1987 book, which examined alliance behavior in the Middle East. The final chapter showed, however, that it can also explain the anomalous distribution of power between the Soviet and American alliance systems during the Cold War. In a subsequent article (not cited by Vasquez), the theory was used to explain the alliance behavior of four different states in Southwest Asia (Walt 1988). Another article (also not mentioned by Vasquez) shows how balance-of-threat theory explains alliance dynamics in Europe during the 1930s, a period that poses an especially demanding test for the theory. In particular, the theory explains why (1) the East European states failed to balance effectively against both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, (2) the United States was the last great power to mobilize for World War II, and (3) Great Britain and France balanced more slowly than hindsight might dictate. Parenthetically, this article also shows that Britain and France did not fail to balance the rising threat from Nazi Germany, as Vasquez, Schroeder, and others imply (Walt 1992b). Other scholars have successfully used balance-of-threat theory to explain the formation of the Gulf War coalition in 1990–91 and to analyze the grand strategy of the United States in the post-Cold War period (Garnham 1991, Mastanduno 1997). Finally, Vasquez does not refer to my recent efforts to apply the theory to a new realm—the international consequences of domestic revolutions (Walt 1992a, 1996). Thus, Vasquez’s central claim—that balance-of-threat theory does not have “excess empirical content”—is false. And with this error exposed, his argument collapses.

## Conclusion

Viewed as a whole, Vasquez’s essay is a classic illustration of the hazards of small sample size. First, he relies on one modern work on the history and philosophy of science. Second, he relies on five contemporary realist works. Finally, he cursorily surveys the writings he examines, thereby missing the novel facts they uncover. This combination of problems is fatal to his argument, and prevents him from offering a useful criticism of realism in general or the specific body of literature under examination.

This failure is unfortunate, because realism is not without flaws and certainly should be exposed to criticism. The realist perspective offers a simple and powerful way to understand relations among political groups (including states) and offers compelling (albeit imperfect) accounts of a diverse array of international phenomena. But it is hardly the only way to study international relations. In the future, as in the past, scholars will continue to revise and extend the diverse body of realist thought. In doing so, they will inevitably disagree in various ways. At the same time, other scholars will pursue a variety of nonrealist research programs, and the resulting competition among different approaches will help us refine our understanding of international politics. The clash of theories both within and across competing research programs is essential to progress in the social sciences and should be

welcomed. Progress will be swifter, however, if criticism seeks to do more than merely delegitimize realism, or any other approach a critic happens to dislike.

## Notes

- 1 Some realists might add the assumption that states are more or less rational actors, although several prominent realists (including the present author) also examine how domestic politics can affect the “rational” assessment of strategic interests. For a sample of recent attempts to identify the core features of the realist paradigm, see Mearsheimer 1994–95; Van Evera, n.d., chapter 1; Walt 1992b, 473.
- 2 Recent examples and discussions of the broad body of realist thought include Brooks 1997; Brown, Lynn-Jones, and Miller 1995; Desch 1996; Deudney 1993; Elman 1996; Frankel 1996a, 1996b; Gilpin 1986; Grieco 1990; Van Evera n.d., chapter 1; and Zakaria 1992.
- 3 The most egregious example is Vasquez’s claim that Colin and Miriam Elman’s 1995 letter to the editor of *International Security* illustrates the response to Schroeder of scholars “sympathetic to realism” (p. 908). Such an assertion would be valid only if realism were in fact a single theory and if all so-called realists agreed with the Elmans’ position. Vasquez offers no evidence that this is the case, which it is surely not.
- 4 For example, realism provides cogent explanations for (1) the failure of all modern efforts to gain hegemony over the state system; (2) the nearly universal tendency for great powers to be extremely sensitive to shifts in the balance of power; (3) the constancy of security competition among great powers; (4) the difficulty of sustaining effective international cooperation; (5) the tendency for great powers to acquire either formal empires or informal spheres of influence; and (6) the tendency for great powers to imitate one another over time. Realism does not provide the *only* explanation for these (and other) phenomena, but it contains a set of explanations that one would not want to dismiss out of hand.
- 5 As I wrote in *The Origins of Alliances*: “Balancing and bandwagoning are usually framed solely in terms of capabilities. . . . This conception should be revised, however, to account for the other factors that statesmen consider when deciding with whom to ally. *Although power is an important part of the equation, it is not the only one*” (Walt 1987, 21, emphasis added; see also 263–4).

## References

- Brooks, Stephen. “Dueling Realisms.” *International Organization* 51 (Summer 1997): 445–77.
- Brown, Michael, Sean Lynn-Jones, and Steven Miller. eds. *The Perils of Anarchy: Contemporary Realism and International Security*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995.
- Christensen, Thomas J., and Jack L. Snyder. “Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity.” *International Organization* 44 (Spring 1990): 137–68.
- Desch, Michael. “Why Realists Disagree about the Third World (and Why They Shouldn’t).” *Security Studies* 5 (Spring 1996): 358–84.
- Deudney, Daniel. “Dividing Realism: Structural Realism and Security Materialism on Nuclear Security and Proliferation.” *Security Studies* 2 (Summer 1993): 7–36.
- Elman, Colin. “Why *Not* Neorealist Theories of Foreign Policy” *Security Studies* 6 (Autumn 1996): 7–53.
- Elman, Colin, and Miriam Fendius Elman. “History vs. Neorealism: A Second Look.” *International Security* 20 (Summer 1995): 182–93.
- Frankel, Benjamin, ed. *Roots of Realism*. London: Frank Cass, 1996a.
- . *Realism: Restatements and Renewal*. London: Frank Cass, 1996b.
- Garnham, David. “Explaining Middle Eastern Alignments during the Gulf War.” *Jerusalem Journal of International Relations* 13 (September 1991): 63–83.
- Gilpin, Robert. “The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism.” In *Neorealism and Its Critics*, edited by Robert O. Keohane. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.
- Glaser, Charles L. “Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help.” *International Security* 19 (Summer 1994–45): 50–90.

- Grieco, Joseph. *Cooperation among Nations: Europe, America, and the Non-Tariff Barriers to Trade*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990.
- Keohane, Robert O. *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.
- . "Realism, Neorealism and the Study of World Politics." In *Neorealism and Its Critics*, edited by Robert O. Keohane. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.
- Mastanduno, Michael. "Preserving the Unipolar Moment: Realist Theories and U.S. Grand Strategy after the Cold War." *International Security* 21 (Spring 1997): 49–88.
- Mearsheimer, John J. "The False Promise of International Institutions." *International Security* 19 (Winter 1994–95): 5–49.
- Morgenthau, Hans J. *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1946.
- Ruggie, John G. "Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity: Toward a Neorealist Synthesis." *World Politics* 35 (January 1983): 261–85.
- Schweller, Randall L. "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In." *International Security* 19 (Summer 1994): 72–107.
- Snyder, Jack L. *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991.
- Van Evera, Stephen. *Causes of War: Vol. 1: The Structure of Power and the Roots of War*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, N.d.
- Vasquez, John F. "The Realist Paradigm and Degenerative versus Progressive Research Programs: An Appraisal of Neotraditional Research on Waltz's Balancing Proposition." *American Political Science Review*, 91 (December 1997): 899–912.
- Walt, Stephen M. *The Origins of Alliances*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987.
- . "Testing Theories of Alliance Formation: The Case of Southwest Asia." *International Organization* 42 (Spring 1988): 275–316.
- . "Revolution and War." *World Politics* 44 (April 1992a): 321–68.
- . "Alliances, Threats, and U.S. Grand Strategy: A Reply to Kaufman and Labs." *Security Studies* 1 (Spring 1992b): 448–82.
- Waltz, Kenneth N. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979.
- Wendt, Alexander. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming, N.d.
- Zakaria, Fareed. "Realism and Domestic Politics." *International Security* 17 (Fall 1992): 177–98.

# Is anybody still a realist?

*Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik*

From: *International Security* 24, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 5–55.

Realism, the oldest and most prominent theoretical paradigm in international relations, is in trouble. The problem is not lack of interest. Realism remains the primary or alternative theory in virtually every major book and article addressing general theories of world politics, particularly in security affairs. Controversies between neorealism and its critics continue to dominate international relations theory debates. Nor is the problem realism's purported inability to make point predictions. Many specific realist theories are testable, and there remains much global conflict about which realism offers powerful insights. Nor is the problem the lack of empirical support for simple realist predictions, such as recurrent balancing; or the absence of plausible realist explanations of certain salient phenomena, such as the Cold War, the "end of history,"<sup>1</sup> or systemic change in general. Research programs advance, after all, by the refinement and improvement of previous theories to account for anomalies. There can be little doubt that realist theories rightfully retain a salient position in international relations theory.

The central problem is instead that the theoretical core of the realist approach has been undermined by its own defenders—in particular so-called defensive and neoclassical realists—who seek to address anomalies by recasting realism in forms that are theoretically less determinate, less coherent, and less distinctive to realism. Realists like E.H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau, and Kenneth Waltz sought to highlight the manipulation, accumulation, and balancing of power by sober unsentimental statesmen, focusing above all on the limits imposed on states by the international distribution of material resources. They viewed realism as the bulwark against claims about the autonomous influence of democracy, ideology, economic integration, law, and institutions on world politics. Many recent realists, by contrast, seek to redress empirical anomalies, particularly in Waltz's neorealism, by subsuming these traditional counterarguments. The result is that many realists now advance the very assumptions and causal claims in opposition to which they traditionally, and still, claim to define themselves.

This expansion would be unproblematic, even praiseworthy, if it took place on the basis of the further elaboration of an unchanging set of core realist premises. It would be quite an intellectual coup for realists to demonstrate—as realists from Thucydides through Machiavelli and Hobbes to Morgenthau sought to do—that the impact of ideas, domestic institutions, economic interdependence, and international institutions actually reflects the exogenous distribution and manipulation of interstate power capabilities. Some contemporary realists do continue to cultivate such arguments, yet such efforts appear today more like exceptions to the rule. Many among the most prominent and thoughtful contemporary realists invoke instead variation in other exogenous influences on state behavior—state preferences, beliefs, and international institutions—to trump the direct and

indirect effects of material power. Such factors are consistently treated as *more* important than power. We term such an approach “minimal realism,” because it retains only two core assumptions—little more than anarchy and rationality—neither of which is distinctively realist. By reducing realist core assumptions to anarchy and rationality, minimal realism broadens realism so far that it is now consistent with *any* influence on rational state behavior, including those once uniformly disparaged by realists as “legalist,” “liberal,” “moralist,” or “idealist.” The concept of “realism” has thus been stretched to include assumptions and causal mechanisms within alternative paradigms, albeit with no effort to reconcile the resulting contradictions.<sup>2</sup> Contemporary realists lack an explicit nontrivial set of core assumptions. Those they set forth either are not distinctive to realism or are overtly contradicted by their own midrange theorizing. In sum, the malleable realist rubric now encompasses nearly the entire universe of international relations theory (including current liberal, epistemic, and institutional theories) and excludes only a few intellectual scarecrows (such as outright irrationality, widespread self-abnegating altruism, slavish commitment to ideology, complete harmony of state interests, or a world state).

The practical result is that the use of the term “realist” misleads us as to the actual import of recent empirical research. The mislabeling of realist claims has obscured the major—and ironic—achievement of recent realist work, namely to deepen and broaden the proven explanatory power and scope of the established liberal, epistemic, and institutional paradigms. The more precise the midrange theories and hypotheses contemporary realists advance, the clearer it becomes that such claims are not realist. Some subsume in a theoretically unconstrained way nearly all potential rationalist hypotheses about state behavior except those based on irrational or incoherent behavior. Others rely explicitly on variation in exogenous factors like democratic governance, economic interdependence, systematic misperception, the transaction cost-reducing properties of international institutions, organizational politics, and aggressive ideology. This is obscured because most realists test their favored explanations only against other variants of realism—normally Waltzian neo-realism—rather than against alternative liberal, epistemic, and institutional theories, as they once did. Recent realist scholarship unwittingly throws the realist baby out with the neorealist bathwater.

Our criticism of recent realist theory is not a semantic quibble, an invitation to yet another purely abstract debate about the labeling and relabeling of international relations ideal-types, or a philosophical inquiry into the development of research paradigms. It is a direct challenge to the theoretical distinctiveness of contemporary realism, one with immediate and significant practical implications. Recent realist theory has become a hindrance rather than a help in structuring theoretical debates, guiding empirical research, and shaping both pedagogy and public discussion. It no longer helps to signal the analyst’s adherence to specific deeper assumptions implicated in any empirical explanation of concrete events in world politics. If such complete confusion is possible, some might be tempted to reject realism—and perhaps with it, all “isms” in international relations theory—as *inherently* vague, indeterminate, contradictory, or just plain wrong.<sup>3</sup> This is an understandable response, but it is, at the very least, premature. Although battles among abstract “isms” can often be arid, the specification of well-developed paradigms around sets of core assumptions remains central to the study of world politics. By unambiguously linking specific claims to common core assumptions, paradigms assist us in developing coherent explanations, structuring social scientific debates, considering a full range of explanatory options, defining the scope of particular claims, understanding how different theories and hypotheses relate to one another, and clarifying the implications of specific findings. While realism is not the only basic international relations



theory in need of clarification, its long history and central position in the field make it an especially important focus for theory, research, pedagogy, and policy analysis. No other paradigm so succinctly captures the essence of an enduring mode of interstate interaction based on the manipulation of material power—one with a venerable history.<sup>4</sup> And it need not be incoherent. Accordingly, we shall propose not a rejection but a reformulation of realism in three assumptions—a reformulation that highlights the distinctive focus of realism on conflict and material power . . .

***Realism as a paradigm: three core assumptions***

Many among the most prominent contemporary forms of realism lack both coherence and distinctiveness. To see precisely why and how this is so, however, we must first demonstrate that a coherent, distinct formulation of the core assumptions underlying the realist paradigm is possible, practical, and productive. Three “core” assumptions are necessary and sufficient for this purpose. Our formulation comprises the essential elements of a social scientific theory, namely assumptions about actors, agency, and structural constraint.<sup>5</sup> Though few if any formulations in the realist literature are identical to this one, many overlap.<sup>6</sup>

*Assumption 1—The nature of the actors: rational, unitary political units in anarchy.* The first and least controversial assumption of realism concerns the nature of basic social actors. Realism assumes the existence of a set of “conflict groups,” each organized as a unitary political actor that rationally pursues distinctive goals within an anarchic setting. Within each territorial jurisdiction, each actor is a sovereign entity able to undertake unitary action. Between jurisdictions, anarchy (no sovereign power) persists. Realists assume, moreover, that these sovereign conflict groups are rational, in the conventional sense that they select a strategy by choosing the most efficient available means to achieve their ends, subject to constraints imposed by environmental uncertainty and incomplete information.<sup>7</sup>

What is essential to the logic of realist theory is not the particular scope of the actors, but the ability to draw a sharp distinction between anarchy among actors and hierarchy within them. As Kenneth Waltz, Robert Gilpin, and many others have noted, under other historical circumstances one might replace states with tribes, domains, principalities, city-states, regional political unions, or whatever other conflict group enjoys a monopoly of legitimate force within territorial jurisdictions. In modern international relations, the state is generally accepted as the dominant form of political order able to pursue a unitary foreign policy.<sup>8</sup>

*Assumption 2—The nature of state preferences: fixed and uniformly conflictual goals.* The second realist assumption is that state preferences are fixed and uniformly conflictual.<sup>9</sup> Interstate politics is thus a perpetual interstate bargaining game over the distribution and redistribution of scarce resources. Much of the power of realist theory, leading realists like Carr, Morgenthau, and Waltz consistently maintained, comes from the assumption that state preferences are fixed. It is this assumption, they argue, that releases us from the “reductionist” temptation to seek the causes of state behavior in the messy process of domestic preference formation, from the “moralist” temptation to expect that ideas influence the material structure of world politics, from the “utopian” temptation to believe that any given group of states have naturally harmonious interests, and from the “legalist” temptation to believe that states can overcome power politics by submitting disputes to common rules and institutions.<sup>10</sup>

Despite their general agreement on the assumption of fixed preferences, realists display far less agreement about the precise nature of such preferences. Most assume only that, in Waltz’s oft-cited phrase, states “at a minimum, seek their own preservation and, at a maximum, drive for universal domination”—an elastic assumption much criticized for its

vagueness. Such an imprecise assumption negates the explanatory value of assuming fixed preferences.<sup>11</sup> From game theorists like Robert Powell to constructivists like Alexander Wendt, there is broad agreement that this does not constitute a sharp enough assumption about the nature of the state—that is, of its state–society relations and resulting state preferences—on which to build explanatory theory. In a world of status quo states and positive-sum interactions, for example, traditional realist behaviors may well not emerge at all. Lest we permit the entire range of liberal, epistemic, and institutional sources of varying state preferences to enter into realist calculations, a narrower assumption is required.<sup>12</sup>

We submit that a distinctive realist theory is therefore possible only if we assume the existence of high conflict among underlying state preferences—what John Mearsheimer labels a “fundamentally competitive” world and Joseph Grieco sees as one dominated by relative gains seeking (a high value of  $k$ ).<sup>13</sup> Only then does a rational government have a consistent incentive to employ costly means to compel others to heed its will. Only then, therefore, should we expect to observe recurrent power balancing, the overriding imperative to exploit relative power, and (in extreme cases) concern about survival and security, as well as other realist pathologies.<sup>14</sup> In short, realists view the world as one of constant competition for control over scarce goods. This explicit assumption of fixed and uniformly conflictual preferences is the most general assumption consistent with the core of traditional realist theory. Governments may conflict over any scarce and valuable good, including agricultural land, trading rights, and allied tribute, as in the time of Thucydides; imperial dominion, as observed by historians from Ancient Rome through the Renaissance; religious identity, dynastic prerogatives, and mercantilist control, as in early modern Europe; national and political ideology, as in most of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries; or purely economic interests, for, as Waltz himself observes, “economic and technological competition is often as keen as military competition” . . .<sup>15</sup>

*Assumption 3—International structure: the primacy of material capabilities.* The first two assumptions—namely that states (or other hierarchical conflict groups) are unitary, rational actors in international politics and that they hold conflicting preferences—imply that realism is concerned primarily with the determinants of distributive bargaining among states. These assumptions, however, remain insufficient to distinguish realist theory, for two related reasons. First, they characterize only agents, but not the structure of their interaction. We still know nothing, even in principle, about how the outcomes of interstate bargaining in anarchy are determined. Second, the two assumptions describe a world of constant background conditions. What permits us to explain variation in world politics?

We thus require a third and pivotal assumption, namely that interstate bargaining outcomes reflect the relative cost of threats and inducements, which is directly proportional to the distribution of material resources. In contrast to theories that emphasize the role of issue-specific coordination, persuasive appeals to shared cultural norms or identities, relative preference intensity, international institutions, or collective norms in shaping bargaining outcomes, realism stresses the ability of states, absent a common international sovereign, to coerce or bribe their counterparts. This is consistent with the assumptions outlined above. If underlying state preferences are assumed to be zero-sum, there is generally no opportunity (absent a third party at whose expense both benefit) for mutually profitable compromise or contracting to a common institution in order to realize positive-sum gains. Nor can states engage in mutually beneficial political exchange through issue linkage. The primary means of redistributing resources, therefore, is to threaten punishment or offer a side payment. It follows that the less costly threats or inducements are to the sender, and the more costly or valuable they are to the target, the more credible and effective they will be. Each state

employs such means up to the point where making threats and promises are less costly to them than the (uniform) benefits thereby gained.<sup>16</sup>

The ability of a state to do this successfully—its influence—is proportional to its underlying power, which is defined in terms of its access to exogenously varying material resources. For realists, such variation does not reduce to variation in preferences, beliefs, or institutional position. States faced with a similar strategic situation will extract a similar proportion of domestic resources. With fixed, uniform preferences, a large state will thus expend more resources and is therefore more likely to prevail. The obvious example is military force, but there is no reason to exclude from the realist domain the use of commercial or financial sanctions, boycotts, and inducements to achieve economic ends—commonly termed “mercantilism”—regardless of whether the outcome is connected with security or the means are military. Realists need only assume that efficacy is proportional to total material capabilities. It follows that the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must . . .

### **The degeneration of contemporary realist theory**

So far we have argued that a distinct realist paradigm must rest on three core assumptions. The power of these premises can be seen in contemporary realist theories that adhere firmly to them. Despite his curious reluctance to make explicit assumptions of conflictual preferences and rationality, Kenneth Waltz’s influential neorealist theory, which stresses the polarity of the international system, is broadly consistent with these premises. John Mearsheimer’s gloomy predictions about the future of Europe, derived from consideration of the consequences of shifts in polarity on national military policy, are as well.<sup>17</sup> Joanne Gowa adheres to core realist assumptions in her provocative argument that both the democratic peace and post-World War II international liberalization were designed in large part to generate “security externalities” within a bipolar structure of power.<sup>18</sup> Stephen Krasner, Robert Gilpin, and David Lake have argued that the level of overall openness in the world economy is a function of the concentration of control over economic capabilities.<sup>19</sup> Robert Keohane, while in other senses not a realist, applies a similar logic to the role of hegemony in international economic institutions.<sup>20</sup> Gilpin and Paul Kennedy address the historical succession of security orders.<sup>21</sup> On a recognizably realist basis, Dale Copeland explains major war and Christopher Layne criticizes the democratic peace thesis.<sup>22</sup> Robert Powell’s game-theoretical reformulation of realism in terms of increasing returns to material capabilities, like closely related theories of offense and defense dominance, fits within the three core assumptions, as does Barry Posen’s analysis of variation in military doctrine.<sup>23</sup>

Among those who claim to be realists today, however, adherence to these core realist premises is the exception rather than the rule. Most recent realist scholarship—notably that of “defensive” and “neoclassical” realists—flatly violates the second and third premises. To illustrate this tendency, we first turn briefly to recent developments in abstract realist theory, focusing particularly on explicit definitions of realism, then trace three trends in recent empirical theory and research that highlight the slide of realism into liberal, epistemic, and institutionalist theory, respectively.

### ***Minimal realism in theory***

Most recent formulations of the realist paradigm are inconsistent with our tripartite formulation. Most important among these, for our purposes here, is what we term “minimal

realism.” Minimal realists seek to define a distinct and coherent realist paradigm with reference to a set of assumptions less restrictive than the three we outline above.

The most extreme among minimal realists maintain that realism’s distinctiveness vis-à-vis other international relations paradigms lies solely in our first assumption—the existence of rational actors in an anarchic setting. Joseph Grieco, for example, maintains that realists need only assume rationality and anarchy—in other words, the pursuit of rational “self-help” strategies—to derive a concern about security and autonomy, a measure of underlying strategic conflict, strategies of relative-gains seeking and balancing of material power, and other elements of realist theory.<sup>24</sup> Outside of a small group of such realists, however, a variety of scholars agree that the assumption of hierarchical actors interacting rationally in an anarchic world is insufficient to distinguish realism. As we discuss below, this assumption is shared by almost all other schools.<sup>25</sup> Because anarchy and rationality are constant, moreover, assuming them tells us little about the distinctive realist variables and causal mechanisms for explaining variation in state behavior.

Other recent definitions of a realist paradigm therefore include additional assumptions, which seek to serve the same functions of social theory as our second and third assumptions, namely to specify agency and structure, and the interaction between them. Two assumptions are particularly common. First, states seek to realize a fixed set of underlying preferences ranging from defending their territorial integrity and political independence to expanding their influence over their international environment (often referred to, somewhat misleadingly, as “security” and “power,” respectively). Second, among the political means states employ to resolve the resulting conflicts, force and the threat of force are preeminent. Nearly all the authors considered in this article base their discussion of realism on such a definition, even when some fail to make this explicit.<sup>26</sup>

Yet even this more elaborate form of minimal realism fails to distinguish realism from its alternative paradigms, because nearly all variants of liberal, epistemic, and institutionalist theories share the same three assumptions.<sup>27</sup> Consider, for example, functional regime theory, democratic peace theory, theories of “aggressor” states, “endogenous” theories of international trade policy, and strategic culture theory. Surely, none is realist, yet each concurs that in an anarchic world system, no superordinate institution can establish a monopoly of legitimate force; rational unitary states are the major actors.<sup>28</sup> (Although it is true that liberals and epistemic theorists focus on contestation among subnational actors in the process of preference or belief formation, they generally hold that they act rationally thereafter.) Nearly all agree, moreover, that states are self-interested and their preferences, at least in security matters, lie somewhere between security and power. Indeed, nearly all go much further, assuming that a perfect underlying harmony of interest is so rare as to be almost irrelevant; a measure of conflict over underlying values and interests, all modern theories agree, is endemic to world politics. Nearly all concur, furthermore, that governments generally place a high, perhaps superordinate, value on national security, territorial integrity, and political independence. They also agree that a central and often decisive instrument available to states—the *ultima ratio*, at least in the abstract—is coercive force. In sum, among modern international relations theories, the claims that “power and interests matter,” that states seek to “influence” one another in pursuit of often conflicting “self-interests,” and that “self-help” through military force is an important, perhaps the most important, instrument of statecraft, are trivial.

Most clearly missing from minimal realism, as compared to the tripartite definition with which we began, are any distinctive assumptions about the source and resolution of conflict. Yet its adherents continue to employ realist rhetoric and claim consistency with

traditional realist theory. This lack of distinctiveness is not simply a matter of abstract definition. It is, we argue, the most striking common characteristic of contemporary midrange “realist” theories. Increasingly, realist research invokes factors extraneous, even contradictory, to the three core realist assumptions, but consistent with core assumptions of existing nonrealist paradigms. This degeneration takes three distinct forms, depending on whether realists invoke exogenous variation in preferences, beliefs, or international institutions. These correspond, respectively, to realist degeneration into liberal, epistemic, and institutionalist theories. Below we consider each in turn.

***From realism to liberalism: power is what states want it to be***

The traditional realist view—about which there was, until recently, little disagreement—assumes that state preferences are fixed and uniform. Morgenthau and Waltz, we have seen, believed that this assumption accounts for realism’s power and parsimony.<sup>29</sup> Still, there has been heated debate among modern realists over precisely which fixed, uniform preferences should be ascribed to states. Morgenthau emphasizes power itself as a goal, by which he may have meant a generalized desire to expand.<sup>30</sup> Waltz speaks of survival as the ultimate goal of states, but allows that states may seek anything between minimal survival and world domination. As we have seen, this assumption imposes almost no constraint on state behavior, because it subsumes the entire spectrum of possible motivations of states from pure harmony to zero-sum conflict, undefined and untheorized. Only outright self-abnegation is excluded.<sup>31</sup> This has given rise to a variety of formulations of the precise specification of state preferences. For our purposes, we need note only that throughout there has been agreement *in principle* that realism must assume fixed and uniform preferences, without which it loses its distinctiveness and power.

Yet many intellectual descendants of Morgenthau and Waltz reject even this. They neither simply disagree about the specific nature of fixed assumptions to be assumed, nor even challenge the notion that they are conflictual. They reject the underlying notion of fixed preferences itself. Nearly all argue that state behavior is influenced not just by power calculations, but by the varying points on the spectrum between motivations of security and power (expansion) on which different states find themselves. Such explanations inevitably import consideration of exogenous variation in the societal and cultural sources of state preferences, thereby sacrificing both the coherence of realism and appropriating midrange theories of interstate conflict based on liberal assumptions. Such theories include those that stress the nature of domestic representative institutions (e.g., the democratic peace), the nature of economic interests (e.g., liberal interdependence theories), and collective values concerning national identity, socioeconomic redistribution, and political institutions . . .

*Neoclassical realism.* Whereas Snyder and Grieco stress the preference of states for security, a new generation of realists, recently heralded by Gideon Rose as “neoclassical realists” (NCRs), stresses the other pole of Waltz’s loose specification of state preferences—the natural desire of all states to wield external influence.<sup>32</sup> States, the NCRs argue, do not simply respond defensively to threats; they exploit power differentials to expand their influence over their external environment—a view of international politics quite different from that based on the simple assumption that states seek security. Some of these realists—notably Zakaria, as we have seen—are harsh critics of Snyder and others for their purported ad hoc reliance on domestic factors to explain conflict among states assumed only to seek security.

Yet, ironically, neoclassical realism (NCR) suffers from precisely the same weaknesses as defensive realism, namely theoretical indeterminacy and a reliance on exogenous variation in state preferences. Most NCRs seek to incorporate in one form or another variation between states with underlying status quo and revisionist preferences. The incorporation of variation in underlying domestic preferences, we argue, undermines (if not eliminates) the theoretical distinctiveness of NCR as a form of realism by rendering it indistinguishable from nonrealist theories about domestic institutions, ideas, and interests. For realists, however, these domestic preference shifts, moreover, remain *ad hoc*.<sup>33</sup> As with defensive realists, this inclination toward indeterminacy and indistinctness is not a purely abstract concern, but adversely influences the empirical work of some of realism's latest and brightest defenders . . .

***. . . From realism to epistemic theory: power is what states believe it to be***

Realism's central analytical leverage, parsimony, and distinctiveness derive from its ability to explain social life simply through variation in the distribution of objective material power capabilities, rather than preferences, perceptions, or norms. As Benjamin Frankel succinctly puts it, realism assumes "that there are things out there that exist independently of our thoughts and experience. When we admonish an individual to be realistic we urge that individual to give up beliefs or notions that fly in the face of reality."<sup>34</sup> Yet while contemporary realists continue to speak of international "power," their midrange explanations of state behavior have subtly shifted the core emphasis from variation in objective power to variation in *beliefs and perceptions* of power.

This poses a fundamental problem. If the perceptions and beliefs about effective means-ends calculations of states, given adequate information, consistently fail to correspond to material power relationships, then power is at best one of a number of important factors and perhaps a secondary one. The parsimony and coherence of realist theory is eroded.<sup>35</sup> When recent realists theorize this relationship explicitly, moreover, they are forced to borrow propositions more fully elaborated in existing epistemic theories, which theorize the influence of societal beliefs that structure means-ends calculations and affect perceptions of the environment. If realism subsumes, alongside traditional material capabilities, factors such as national ideology, organizational biases, and perceptions, what remains theoretically distinctive? If any government acting on the basis of geopolitical national interest *or* the aims of a particularistic interest group or ideationally induced strategies or misperceptions is in accord with "realist" theory, what plausible constraints on state behavior are excluded? . . .

## **Conclusion**

Perhaps the most useful way to judge the power of a social scientific paradigm is by examining what it is able to exclude. By this standard, the realist paradigm is degenerating. Its conceptual foundations are being "stretched" beyond all recognition or utility.<sup>36</sup> There exists no set of shared nontrivial assumptions that can distinguish the arguments shared by realists today. Instead of challenging competing liberal, epistemic, and institutional theories, realists now regularly seek to subsume their causal mechanisms. Realism has become little more than a generic commitment to the assumption of rational state behavior. One result is *ad hoc* appeals to exogenous variation in national preferences, beliefs, and international institutions. Others, to be sure, elaborate more detailed midrange causal propositions about



the causes and consequences of such variation, but the explicitness of these arguments serves only to highlight their liberal, institutional, or epistemic provenance. From the perspective of the realist paradigm with which we began this article, we ask, “Is anybody still a realist?” From the perspective of minimal realism the question becomes: “Is everybody now a realist?” Either way, realism is in need of reformulation.

The tendency to label nearly all rationalist explanations of state behavior “realist” misstates the broader significance of the empirical research that self-styled realists have recently conducted. Its real significance lies *not* in the revitalization of core realist premises, to which its connection is tenuous at best. It lies instead in the empirical validation of assumptions about world politics that realists traditionally reject. The mislabeling of realism has obscured the major achievement of this research in the 1990s, namely to demonstrate in important areas of security studies the explanatory power of liberal, epistemic, and institutionalist theories. Here many of the realists considered above, as well as critics like Vasquez—all of whom explicitly defend adherence to realism, despite anomalies, because there appears to exist no alternative paradigm—understate the problem.<sup>37</sup> The real problem is not simply the use of ad hoc arguments to patch anomalies, but the systematic use of arguments from existing alternative paradigms.

Instead of acknowledging this trend, recent realist writings defend it by inviting us to return to the early 1940s—a period in which realists such as E.H. Carr convinced scholars that the central debate in international relations theory should be between “realists,” who believe in rationality, prudence, and the importance of national self-interest, and “idealists,” who believe in the uniform harmony of state interests, the power of altruistic motivations, or the possibility of world government. Whether this dichotomy was a useful guide fifty years ago remains an open question. Its unsuitability today should be obvious to all. These two categories are too vague, too broad, too open-ended, too normative, and too dismissive of contemporary nonrealist theory to be of much use as a guide to social scientific theory and research.<sup>38</sup> The major development in international relations theory over the past three decades is instead the emergence and firm establishment of more subtly differentiated rationalist theories—variants of liberal, epistemic, and institutionalist theories. These are potent competitors to realist claims and should be recognized as such. Any categorization of international relations theories that fails to accord these a central and distinct place is profoundly misleading.

One corrective to the degeneration of contemporary realism would be, of course, simply to jettison the term altogether. We believe it is too soon to contemplate such a radical solution. It would be preferable for realists and their interlocutors to observe greater precision in stating and applying its premises. A commitment to “realism” should signal far more than a belief in state rationality and international anarchy. It should mark a commitment to a particular rationalist theory of state behavior in anarchy, one stressing the resolution of international conflict through the application of material power capabilities. The true role of such capabilities can be appreciated only through conceptual clarity, not conceptual stretching. Acceptance of our tripartite reformulation of realism would provide theoretical foundations clearly distinct from other rationalist theories, generate crisper empirical predictions, and contribute to more rigorous multicausal syntheses. Such a coherent and distinct realist paradigm would be fit to assume its rightful role in the study of world politics.

## Notes

- 1 We agree with much of the analysis in John Vasquez, "The Realist Paradigm and Degenerative vs. Progressive Research Programs: An Appraisal of Neotraditional Research on Waltz's Balancing Proposition," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (December 1997), pp. 899–912. But we do not agree, among other things, that balancing behavior per se provides a strong test of realism or that realism is beyond redemption. On various criticisms, see also Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Richard Ned Lebow and Thomas Risse-Kappen, eds., *International Relations and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); and Paul W. Schroeder, "Historical Reality vs. Neorealist Theory," in Michael E. Brown, Sean M. Lynn-Jones, and Steven E. Miller, eds., *The Perils of Anarchy: Contemporary Realism and International Security* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), pp. 421–461; Peter J. Katzenstein, Robert O. Keohane, and Stephen D. Krasner, "International Organization and the Study of World Politics," *International Organization*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (Autumn 1998), pp. 670–674; and Benjamin Frankel, ed., *Realism: Restatements and Renewal* (London: Frank Cass, 1996), pp. xi–xii. For rejoinders, see Kenneth N. Waltz, "Evaluating Theories," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (December 1997), pp. 913–918; Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, "Progressive Research and Degenerative Alliances," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (December 1997), pp. 899–912; Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, "Correspondence: History vs. Neo-realism: A Second Look," *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Summer 1995), pp. 182–193; Elman and Elman, "Lakatos and Neorealism: A Reply to Vasquez," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (December 1997), pp. 923–926; Randall L. Schweller, "New Realist Research on Alliances: Refining, not Refuting, Waltz's Balancing Proposition," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (December 1997), pp. 927–930; and Stephen M. Walt, "The Progressive Power of Realism," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (December 1997), pp. 931–935.
- 2 Giovanni Sartori, "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (December 1970), pp. 1033–1053. This is another way in which our critique differs from that of Vasquez, who has also charged that the realist paradigm is degenerating. Vasquez argues that "there is no falsification before the emergence of better theory," and that alternative paradigms do not exist. We demonstrate that they do. Vasquez, "The Realist Paradigm," p. 910.
- 3 Vasquez, "The Realist Paradigm"; and David A. Lake and Robert Powell, eds., *Strategic Choice and International Relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999).
- 4 Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997).
- 5 James S. Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).
- 6 Randall L. Schweller and David Priess suggest this definition, although they neglect it in their midrange theorizing. Schweller and Priess, "A Tale of Two Realisms: Expanding the Institutions Debate," *International Studies Review*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (1997), pp. 1–32. Walt comes close in Walt, "The Progressive Power of Realism," p. 932. For an all-inclusive definition including many of these elements, see Benjamin Frankel, "Restating the Realist Case," in Frankel, *Realism*.
- 7 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979), p. 94; Stephen D. Krasner, *Structural Conflict: The Third World against Global Liberalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 28; Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), pp. 7–8; Robert Gilpin, "No One Loves a Political Realist," in Frankel, *Realism*, p. 7; and Robert O. Keohane, "Realism, Neorealism, and the Study of World Politics," in Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 1–26. This rationality can be bounded; the precise level of calculating ability is inessential to our purposes here, as long as miscalculations are random; if they are not, then other theories may take over.
- 8 Gilpin, "No One Loves a Political Realist"; and Kenneth N. Waltz, "Realist Thought and Neorealist Theory," in Robert L. Rothstein, ed., *The Evolution of Theory in International Relations* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), p. 37.
- 9 Preferences should remain clearly distinct from strategies. State preferences are defined over states of the social world and are therefore "prestrategic," that is, they remain uninfluenced by shifts in

- the strategic environment, such as the distribution of power. Preferences are akin to “tastes” that states bring to the international bargaining table, although they themselves may of course result from forms of international interaction other than those being studied, as do national preferences resulting from economic interdependence. See Robert Powell, “Anarchy in International Relations Theory: The Neorealist-Neoliberal Debate,” *International Organization*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Spring 1994), pp. 313–344; and Andrew Moravcsik, “Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics,” *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Autumn 1997), pp. 513–553.
- 10 Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, pp. 2–12; Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 18–37; and Waltz, “Realist Thought and Neorealist Theory,” pp. 21–37.
  - 11 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 118.
  - 12 Powell, “Anarchy in International Relations Theory,” p. 315; Alexander Wendt, “Social Theory of International Politics,” unpublished manuscript, Dartmouth College, 1998, p. 309; Randall L. Schweller, “Neorealism’s Status-Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?” in Frankel, *Realism*; Moravcsik, “Taking Preferences Seriously”; Jeffrey W. Legro, “Culture and Preferences in the International Cooperation Two-step,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 90, No. 1 (March 1996), pp. 118–137; Barry Buzan, Charles Jones, and Richard Little, *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); and John Gerard Ruggie, “International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order,” in Krasner, *International Regimes*.
  - 13 John J. Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War,” *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Summer 1990), pp. 5–56; and Joseph M. Grieco, “Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism,” *International Organization*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Summer 1988), pp. 485–507. Grieco maintains that states seek both absolute and relative gains. The relative importance of relative gains is given by the coefficient  $k$ . The higher the value of  $k$ , Grieco maintains, the stronger the incentives for relative-gains seeking and the more pronounced the tendency to engage in “defensive positionalist” realist behavior . . .
  - 14 Schweller puts this well: “If states are assumed to seek nothing more than their own survival, why would they feel threatened? . . . Anarchy and self-preservation alone are not sufficient. . . . Predatory states motivated by expansion and absolute gains, not security and the fear of relative losses, are the prime movers of neo-realist theory. Without some possibility for their existence, the security dilemma melts away, as do most concepts associated with contemporary realism.” Schweller, “Neorealism’s Status-Quo Bias,” pp. 91, 119. Somewhat perversely for a realist, he cites Fukuyama, *The End of History*, pp. 254–255. See also Moravcsik, “Taking Preferences Seriously”; Charles L. Glaser, “Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help,” in Brown, Lynn-Jones, and Miller, *The Perils of Anarchy*; and Andrew Kydd, “Sheep in Sheep’s Clothing: Why Security Seekers Do Not Fight Each Other,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Autumn 1997), pp. 153–154.
  - 15 Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International Politics,” *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Fall 1993), p. 57; Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and Michael Mastanduno, “Do Relative Gains Matter? America’s Response to Japanese Industrial Policy,” in David A. Baldwin, ed., *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
  - 16 Coleman argues that coercion—“where the superordinate agrees to withhold an action that would make the subordinate worse off in exchange for the subordinate’s obeying the superordinate”—is a “somewhat special” case of exchange. Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory*, p. 29; and Kenneth A. Oye, *Economic Discrimination and Political Exchange: World Political Economy in the 1930s and 1980s* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992).
  - 17 Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future.”
  - 18 Joanne Gowa, *Allies, Adversaries, and International Trade* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).
  - 19 Stephen D. Krasner, “State Power and the Structure of Foreign Trade,” *World Politics*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (April 1976), pp. 317–347; Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*; David A. Lake, *Power, Protection, and Free Trade: International Sources of U.S. Commercial Policy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988); and Lake, “Leadership, Hegemony, and the International Economy: Naked Emperor or Tattered Monarch with Potential?” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (December 1993), pp. 459–489.

- 20 Keohane, *After Hegemony*.
- 21 Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*; and Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1987).
- 22 Dale Copeland, *Anticipating Power: Dynamic Realism and the Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, forthcoming); and Christopher Layne, "Kant or Cant: The Myth of the Democratic Peace," in Brown, Lynn-Jones, and Miller, *The Perils of Anarchy*, pp. 287–331.
- 23 Robert Powell, "Absolute and Relative Gains in International Relations Theory," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 85, No. 4 (December 1991), pp. 701–726; and Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the Wars* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 69, 229.
- 24 Joseph M. Grieco, "Realist International Theory and the Study of World Politics," in Michael W. Doyle and G. John Ikenberry, eds., *New Thinking in International Relations Theory* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1997), pp. 166–168, is most explicit.
- 25 The transmethodological consensus on this point is near universal. In addition to Wendt, Powell, Moravcsik, Legro, and Schweller, cited above in n. [12], see Helen V. Milner, "The Assumption of Anarchy in International Relations Theory," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (January 1991), pp. 67–85.
- 26 This is true also of some more unwieldy definitions. Elman and Elman, "Lakatos and Neorealism," p. 923, define the realist hard core as rational, strategic states in anarchy seeking survival with limited resources. Ashley Tellis, "Reconstructing Political Realism: The Long March to Scientific Theory," *Security Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Winter 1995–1996), p. 3, describes "political actions aimed at enhancing security" as the "minimum realist program." Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller, "Preface," in Brown, Lynn-Jones, and Miller, *The Perils of Anarchy*, pp. ix–x, focus on rationality, anarchy, and power, but make no assumption that underlying goals conflict and limit their definition to the use of military force. We see a similar move in Buzan, Jones, and Little, *The Logic of Anarchy*, which seeks to integrate interdependence, preferences, information, and institutions into a "realist" theory tied together only by the fact that it is systemic.
- 27 Some sociological theories take the somewhat different view that actors behave according to a noninstrumental "logic of appropriateness," whereby actors conform to internalized rules imposed by society. See Martha Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 28–31; and James March and Johan Olsen, *Rediscovering Institutions: The Organizational Basis of Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1989).
- 28 Stefano Guzzini's assessment goes to the heart of the matter: "The closest we can get to . . . a single . . . assumption that would demarcate realism is the idea of anarchy . . . [But] traditional defenders of collective security [as well as 'democratic peace' liberals] have the same starting point. Rather than setting Realism apart from other international theories, the assumption of anarchy sets International Relations apart from other disciplines." Guzzini, *Realism in International Relations and International Political Economy: The Continuing Story of a Death Foretold* (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. viii–ix. See also Helen V. Milner, "The Assumption of Anarchy in International Relations"; and Keohane, "Introduction," *After Hegemony*.
- 29 Morgenthau speaks for nearly all realists in arguing that realism must "guard against two popular fallacies: the concern with motives and the concern with ideological preferences. History shows no exact and necessary correlation between the quality of motives and the quality of foreign policy." Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, pp. 5–7; Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 29, see also pp. 65–66, 79, 90, 108–112, 196–198, 271; and Grieco, "Realist International Theory," p. 165.
- 30 Morgenthau's use of the term "power" can be ill-defined and overly expansive. See Inis L. Claude, *Power and International Relations* (New York: Random House, 1962), pp. 25–37. 45. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 118, 126. Fareed Zakaria speaks for most contemporary realists when he terms Waltz's writings on such questions "confused and contradictory." Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 26–28.
- 31 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 118, 126. Fareed Zakaria speaks for most contemporary realists when he terms Waltz's writings on such questions "confused and contradictory." Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 26–28.
- 32 Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (October 1998), pp. 144–172.

- 33 Ibid. Rose seeks to make a virtue of this, citing Aristotle for the proposition that domestic politics is simply too complex a subject about which to generalize. This claim must come as a surprise not only to scholars of comparative and U.S. politics, but to those who study the democratic peace, economic interdependence, aggressive ideologies, and other domestic determinants of security policy. In any case, no more recent support for the assumption is provided.
- 34 Frankel, "Restating the Realist Case," p. xiii.
- 35 Robert Jervis, "Realism, Game Theory, and Cooperation," *World Politics*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (April 1988), pp. 317–349. It is, of course, consistent with realism to trace the nature of perception and calculation back to the distribution of material power, as does Waltz in *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 168–172.
- 36 On "conceptual stretching," see Sartori, "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics," p. 970.
- 37 Vasquez, "The Realist Paradigm," pp. 909–911.
- 38 Some constructivists seem also to encourage the use of this dichotomy. We have not, however, considered a constructivist "theory" here because we take seriously those who warn that "constructivism"—like "materialism," "rationalism," and other such broad categories of social theory—does not define a discrete international relations paradigm or theory. It should not, therefore, be employed as a counterpart to realism, liberalism, institutionalism, or epistemic theory. Constructivist arguments might be found in any of these categories. A realist versus idealist/constructionist dichotomy would thus be unhelpful. See Wendt, "Social Theory and International Politics"; and Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (Spring 1998), pp. 890, 909–912.



# Correspondence

Brother, can you spare a paradigm?  
(Or was anybody ever a realist?)

*Peter D. Feaver, Gunther Hellman, Randall L. Schweller,  
Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, William C. Wohlforth, Jeffrey W. Legro,  
and Andrew Moravcsik*

From: *International Security* 25, no. 1 (Summer 2000): 165–93.

## ... To the Editors (Randall L. Schweller writes)

In “Is Anybody Still a Realist?” Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik attempt to discredit the realist credentials of virtually every living, self-styled realist under the age of fifty.<sup>1</sup> Defensive and neoclassical realists are charged with the crime of subsuming antirealist arguments in their midrange theories, thereby muddying the sacred and previously pristine realpolitik waters. In fact, recent realist research has been faithful to the paradigm’s core principles precisely because it has not advanced unicausal explanations of complex phenomena. In so doing, it has restored the theoretical richness of realism that was abandoned by structural realism. The moral of the story is (and I mean this in a purely professional, not personal, way): *Never let your enemies define you*. Legro and Moravcsik mischaracterize realism as a paradigm based solely on the objective, material capabilities of states. To be sure, power and conflict are essential features of realism, as Legro and Moravcsik assert. Realists posit a world of constant competition among groups for scarce social and material resources.<sup>2</sup> This is not to suggest, however, that realists deny the possibility (indeed, existence) of international cooperation; politics, by definition, must contain elements of both common and conflicting interests, collaboration and discord. Rather the realm of international politics is characterized by persistent distributional conflicts that are “closely linked to power as both an instrument and a stake.”<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the most basic realist proposition is that states must recognize and respond to shifts in their relative power; things often go terribly wrong when leaders ignore power realities.

These realist premises, however, do not preclude the introduction of additional theoretical elements (e.g., variation in national goals, state mobilization capacity, domestic politics, and the offense–defense balance), provided that these auxiliary assumptions and causal factors are consistent with realism’s core assumptions and microfoundations.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, realism is not strictly a structural-systemic theory; it may be applied to any specified domain and conflict group.<sup>5</sup>

Legro and Moravcsik will have none of this, however. Their monocausal formulation of the paradigm would effectively prevent realists from saying anything (or anything worthwhile) about, for instance, international institutions, domestic politics, differences in the nature of hegemonic rules and regimes, ethnic conflict, variation in state interests and intentions, and perceptions of power. More important, none of these elements could be used in the construction of realist theories. Indeed, if Legro and Moravcsik had their way, realists



would have to cede the entire subject of international cooperation to liberal, institutionalist, and epistemic theorists.<sup>6</sup> Thus, although Legro and Moravcsik's formulation of realism may "facilitate more decisive tests among existing theories" (p. 46), realism as they have designed it would surely lose every one of them. Moreover, to embrace Legro and Moravcsik's "material capabilities" version of realism, one must dismiss the entire canon of realist theory prior to the appearance of Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* and most realist research that has followed it.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, no one should be surprised that Legro and Moravcsik—who may be counted among realism's most vociferous detractors—would like to put realism in a theoretical strait-jacket. Like foxes guarding the chicken coop, Legro and Moravcsik want us to believe that they are sincerely troubled by the current "ill health" of realism. Ironically, the true enemies of realism are, as they see it, not liberals, constructivists, or Marxists but rather theoretically confused and/or extremely devious contemporary realists, who have appropriated (outright stolen) other paradigms' core assumptions and have cleverly managed to trick everyone into believing that they are distinctly realist arguments. Is it possible that Legro and Moravcsik, the most unlikely of realist saviors, have come to praise and reinvigorate realism, not to bury it? One does not have to be a skeptical realist to dismiss this as a credible motive.

To restore realism's lost paradigmatic distinctness and coherence, Legro and Moravcsik carve up international relations theory into four paradigms: realist, institutionalist, liberal, and epistemic.<sup>8</sup> They then boldly lay out the core assumptions of each paradigm, which they use as unbending yardsticks of paradigmatic faithfulness. The veracity of their central claim that contemporary realism suffers from incoherent and contradictory expansion rests entirely on their specification of these core theoretical assumptions and elements and, more important, on their view of what is and is not consistent with these premises. Are their views on each paradigm's "hard core" so compelling that we can finally expect consensus to be reached within the discipline on these abstruse Lakatosian matters? I think not.

Consider their description of the liberal paradigm as "theories and explanations that stress the role of exogenous variation in underlying state preferences embedded in domestic and transnational state–society relations" (p. 10). Although novel, this conception bears little resemblance to the conventional view of international liberalism. Traditional liberal themes, such as Wilsonian collective security, international integration, the voice of reason, historical progress, universal ethics, and the importance of ideas and "right thinking" leaders, have been unceremoniously excised from the paradigm. This is no mere oversight. I have witnessed firsthand the rage of contemporary liberals when a realist utters the phrase "liberal idealism." This primitive liberal beast, we are told, has long been extinct. Liberals have evolved into "preference variation" theorists. Ideas and idealism are now the exclusive property of the epistemic paradigm. Likewise, international institutions of the kind that Woodrow Wilson and Cordell Hull championed and that contemporary liberal thinkers such as Robert Keohane explored (Does anyone remember neoliberal institutionalism?) are no longer elements of liberalism; they now belong to the institutionalists. It was all a case of mistaken identity. Or, perhaps, we are witnessing the theoretical equivalent of Wilsonian self-determination: Institutions and ideas have exited the liberal paradigm to stake out their own paradigmatic space. Whatever the case may be, I am unpersuaded by such semantic sleight of hand. Such recasted liberalism begs the question: Is anybody still a liberal (or willing to admit it)?

Whereas liberals are permitted to evolve into "preference" theorists, realists must not stray from their traditional and coherent "power" roots; and this is precisely the crime of neoclassical realists.<sup>9</sup> Yet even a cursory reading of the extant realist literature shows that

precisely the opposite is true. Consider the issue of the variation in state interests (preferences or goals), which Legro and Moravcsik believe I have smuggled into the realist paradigm. They insist that I have misread Hans Morgenthau's discussion of imperialist and status quo policies, which they claim refers to states' strategies and not to their interests or preferences. True, Morgenthau says that state interests are defined in terms of power (whatever that means); but he obviously does not believe that the interests, intentions, and goals of states remain fixed and uniform. On the various aims of states, he writes: "A nation whose foreign policy tends toward keeping power and not toward changing the distribution of power in its favor pursues a policy of the status quo. A nation whose foreign policy aims at acquiring more power than it actually has, through a reversal of existing power relations—whose foreign policy, in other words, seeks a favorable change in power status—pursues a policy of imperialism."<sup>10</sup>

Using almost identical language, I defined status quo states as "security maximizers (as opposed to power maximizers), whose goal is to preserve the resources they already control. . . . Revisionist states, by contrast, seek to undermine the established order for the purpose of increasing their power and prestige in the system; that is, they seek to increase, not just to maintain, their resources." I also pointed out that "revisionist states need not be predatory powers; they may oppose the status quo for defensive reasons." As for the sources of these preferences, I simply reiterated the arguments by Robert Gilpin and Morgenthau, model realists according to Legro and Moravcsik, that status quo powers "are usually states that won the last major-power war and created a new world order in accordance with their interests by redistributing territory and prestige." In contrast, revisionist powers are typically those states that lost the last major-power war and/or have increased their power after the international order was established and the benefits were allocated.<sup>11</sup> Unlike Wilsonian liberals, I make no moral judgments about the two types of states: There are no good and bad states, only "haves" and "have nots." There is absolutely no difference between Morgenthau's discussion of status quo and imperialist policies and my discussion of status quo and revisionist states; Morgenthau refers to these different national goals as policies, whereas I call them "state interests." This nonissue is the entire foundation of Legro and Moravcsik's claim that I am not a realist.

By focusing on Morgenthau's use of the terms "imperialist" and "status quo," Legro and Moravcsik neglect to point out that Henry Kissinger also referred to revolutionary and status quo states; E.H. Carr distinguished satisfied from dissatisfied powers; Arnold Wolfers divided states into status quo and revisionist categories; and Raymond Aron saw eternal opposition between the forces of revision and conservation. Are we to believe that all these realists shared Morgenthau's conceptualization of these terms as strategies and not interests (or goals) of states?<sup>12</sup>

There is a good reason why realists have traditionally distinguished between satisfied states that merely seek to keep their power and preserve the established order and dissatisfied states that desire to increase their power and change the status quo. The assumption that states seek power tells us little or nothing about state preferences, aims, interests, or motivations. Because power is useful for achieving any national goal, we cannot make accurate foreign policy predictions without specifying the purposes of power.<sup>13</sup> Power can be used to threaten others, attack them, take things from them, and prevent them from doing things they would otherwise do (e.g., U.S. containment policy). Conversely, power can be used to make others more secure and to enable them to reach goals that they otherwise could not achieve (e.g., the Marshall Plan). Legro and Moravcsik insist that realists must ignore these differences in the aims of power. Adherence to this stricture, however, would render the

concept of power virtually meaningless and entirely useless for constructing theories of foreign policy.<sup>14</sup>

Although Legro and Moravcsik's arguments have some worth, they are largely unpersuasive and ultimately irrelevant. Even if everything they say is correct, and it surely is not, what is their point? If self-described realists are producing theoretically interesting and important research, does it matter what we label it? If contemporary realism is really repackaged liberalism, Marxism, and institutionalism, what has prevented members of these theoretical perspectives from generating similar works? Why have faux realists beaten them to the punch? Does anyone really care?

—Randall L. Schweller  
Columbus, Ohio

### ... To the Editors (William C. Wohlforth writes)

Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik have produced a learned rumination on contemporary international relations scholarship and the role of realism within it that warrants discussion.<sup>15</sup> Their enterprise is so wide-ranging, however, that a full response would occupy too much space in this journal for a debate that is, in the final analysis, far from the immediate concerns of most readers. Although I am among those whose work they tar with the brush of "theoretical degeneration," I shall confine myself to two comments.

First, Legro and Moravcsik face a contradiction between the twin purposes of their article: setting forth their particular vision for the field of international relations, and assessing a large body of scholarship. As a consequence, it is hard to see where the advocacy ends and the detached appraisal begins. They introduce a novel division of the field into four theoretical paradigms—realism, liberalism, "institutionalism," and "epistemic theory"—that they simultaneously try to treat as "established" (p. 7). Established by whom? When? Their article is the first place I encountered "epistemism" as an independent and encompassing theoretical paradigm. The liberal paradigm they discuss appears to be liberalism as reformulated recently by Moravcsik.<sup>16</sup> And their rendering of realism would exclude most scholarly works currently viewed as exemplars of that intellectual school. For example, in *Theory of International Politics*, Kenneth Waltz explicitly contradicts each of the three assumptions Legro and Moravcsik propose as definitively realist.<sup>17</sup> He does not assume fixed, conflictual preferences ("the aims of states may be endlessly varied; they may range from the ambition to conquer the world to the desire merely to be left alone"). He explicitly asserts that his "theory requires no assumptions of rationality" because structure affects state behavior primarily through the processes of socialization and competition (Waltz's is a structural theory, after all, not a theory of bargaining, as Legro and Moravcsik claim). And he does not equate power with material resources, making a point of including "political stability and competence" as basic elements in his definition of state capabilities.<sup>18</sup>

Legro and Moravcsik have recast the entire field of international relations, invented two paradigms, completely reformulated two others, either expelled Waltz's theory from the realist corpus or else rewritten it, and rendered a stern judgment of "degeneration" on a large body of scholarship. This is ambitious, to put it mildly. It would be much easier to respond to their assessment of recent realist scholarship if they had offered some standard of appraisal other than their particular proposal for reorganizing the field. And it would be much easier to assess their proposed relabeling of paradigms if they had presented it separately and made the case for it on its merits. As it stands, the proposal is unclear on many matters, including: the status of theories that do not reduce world politics to "a bargaining

problem" (p. 51); the role of any theory positing a relationship between systemic material structure and actors' preferences and beliefs; and the place of any factor that is systemic and material but not a "resource" (e.g., technology).

To have been found to be "degenerating" in terms of this particular vision of our field is not especially troubling. But neither is it particularly enlightening, which brings me to my second comment. Legro and Moravcsik missed the essential research design and basic findings of my work on the distribution of power and the Cold War. They discuss as my "theoretical innovation" the assertion that "perceptions [of power] are exogenous variables" (p. 39). In fact, the work of mine they mention is concerned primarily with examining national net assessment as a process that causally connects changes in the distribution of capabilities with changed behavior. My research did not find that assessments of power were exogenous to the distribution of material capabilities. On the contrary, decisionmakers' assessments appear to capture real power relationships far better than the crude measures commonly used by political scientists. Indeed, it is Legro and Moravcsik's "two-step" approach to research that insists on a rigid divide between actors' beliefs and the distribution of power. I never wrote that "objective power shifts . . . 'can account neither for the Cold War nor its sudden end'" (p. 39). Instead I showed that standard *measures* of the distribution of capabilities are inaccurate indicators of both national assessments and our best estimate of the real power balance.

Legro and Moravcsik are right that the absence of good measures of power is a major problem for many realist theories. They might have added that comparable measurement problems confront theories of preferences or beliefs. Legro and Moravcsik write as if there is some well-established, generalizable, and predictive "epistemic" theory that can explain the national assessments and associated state behavior that I found in my research better than the admittedly weak realist theories I did employ. Had such work existed, and had I artfully subsumed it under a "realist" rubric, Legro and Moravcsik would have something to write about. But they mention no examples of such a theory, for the simple reason that no such theory existed when I researched the Cold War, and none exists now.

One can defend the necessity of debating the merits of real schools of international relations scholarship. It is hard to see what value would be added by a new debate over imaginary ones.

—William C. Wohlforth  
Washington, D.C.

## Notes

- 1 Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Fall 1999), pp. 5–55. Further references appear in parentheses in the text.
- 2 See Randall L. Schweller and William C. Wohlforth, "Power Test: Evaluating Realism in Response to the End of the Cold War," *Security Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Spring 2000), pp. 69–73.
- 3 Robert Jervis, "Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation: Understanding the Debate," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Summer 1999), pp. 44–45.
- 4 For an insightful discussion of neorealism's missing microfoundation, see Markus Fischer, "Machiavelli's Theory of Foreign Politics," in Benjamin Frankel, ed., *Roots of Realism* (London: Frank Cass, 1996), pp. 272–279.
- 5 See, for instance, Barry R. Posen, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict," in Michael E. Brown, ed., *Ethnic Conflict and International Security* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 103–124.
- 6 Regarding international cooperation, Legro and Moravcsik write: "Explaining integrative aspects [of interstate bargaining] requires a nonrealist theory" (p. 15).

- 7 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979).
- 8 Marxism, widely considered one of the three pillars of international relations theory along with liberalism and realism, is no longer a paradigmatic landlord but instead a mere tenant.
- 9 Curiously, however, they conclude with a plea for “multiparadigmatic synthesis,” which they trumpet as an improvement over “monocausal mania” and “unicausal paradigms.” What is a contemporary realist to do? We are ridiculed either for incorporating distinct elements of other paradigms or, should we become reformed sinners, for embracing monocausal mania.
- 10 Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 4th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), pp. 36–37.
- 11 Randall L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler’s Strategy of World Conquest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 24–25.
- 12 For specific references, see *ibid.*, p. 215, n. 20.
- 13 This is not entirely the same as saying that we must specify the scope and domain of power, that is, power to do what with respect to whom? See David A. Baldwin, *Economic Statecraft* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 18–24.
- 14 In contrast, theories of international politics do not require specification of the purposes of power.
- 15 Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravscik, “Is Anybody Still a Realist?” *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Fall 1999), pp. 5–55. Subsequent references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.
- 16 Andrew Moravscik, “Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics,” *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Autumn 1997), pp. 513–553.
- 17 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979).
- 18 *Ibid.*, pp. 91, 118, 131.

# Index

Note: *f* attached to a page number denotes a figure; *n* attached to a page number denotes an endnote, with appropriate number; page numbers in *italic* indicate extracts within the book; page numbers in **bold** show major sections devoted to the topic.

- absolute gains: barrier to cooperation 114–15, 312; and cheating 312, 326, 332; and economic issues 335; versus relative gains 91*n*8, 311, 314–15, 326–7, 331–2
- Afghanistan War 406, 415
- After Hegemony* (Keohane) 333
- aggregate power 145–6
- Alexander, Gerard 382, 414–21
- alliances: absent in Third World 266; and balance of interests theory 486–7; and balance of threat theory 502; and balancing 75, 80, 87, 89–90; balancing versus bandwagoning 145–9, 488; in bipolar world 131–2; buck-passing versus chain-ganging 259–63; Cold War patterns 181, 502; commitments 211; during peacetime 138; flexibility of alignment 131; formation of 110–11, 164*n*3, 265, 357, 398; historical examples 94; and identity 354; inflexibility 212; and intentions 147–8; maritime versus land powers 94, 95–9; in multipolar systems 102; and the offense-defense balance 481; and power 387–8; and security 121, 228; and threat 147–8, 261, 497; transient nature 181, 231*n*3; and unipolarity 386, 408–9; World War patterns 145, 148*n*3, 181, 259–63, 398, 489, 502
- American Civil War 265, 294, 297, 298, 300*n*22
- Amsterdam Treaty 432, 436*n*8
- anarchy: and competition 431; consequences of 14, 313–14, 342, 464; and constructivism 342–3; and cooperation 157, 320, 325–7; definitions 179, 326–7, 431; and English School 343, 362–3, 367, 372–3; and functional similarity 109–10; institutionalism and 313–14, 320, 322; and neorealism 127; and offensive structural realism 179; as ordering principle 5, 101, 179, 212, 260, 345; persistence of 362–3, 367; realist assumptions of 507, 510, 513, 516*n*26, 516*n*28; and rise and fall realism 211–12; and security 130–31; and self-help 101, 107, 116, 260, 342–3, 345–9; and self-restraint 87; versus hierarchy 110, 112, 114, 186*n*11, 212–13; and violence 114
- animus dominandi* 33–4, 48–9, 63, 189
- anti-Americanism 410, 418
- Anti-Comintern Pact 44–5
- appeasement 43–4, 45, 55, 268, 475, 489
- Arab-Israeli wars 140
- Argentina, regional alliances 90
- arms control 160–62, 175*n*26
- arms races: and China's rise 18; in Cold War 374; danger of matching response 89; domestic factors 165*n*6; motives for cooperation 158; and offense-defense balance 137, 142–3; and the security dilemma 183–4
- Aron, Raymond 125, 222–3, 327, 520
- Art, Robert 441
- automatic balance of power 4–5, 74, 75, 86–90, 116–22
- Axelrod, Robert 314, 322
- balance: and balancing 74; holder of 76, 80
- balance of interest theory 486–7
- balance of power theory 74–100; aims 81–5; classical realism versus English School 362–3; critique 20, 211–12, 483–4; Eurocentric bias 94; explained 74; historical development 94, 99*n*6; and military capabilities 75, 78–9, 306; misconceptions 117–19; multiple meanings 76–80, 117; and peace 78, 83, 386; restraint in anticipation of 89–90; status quo versus flux 83–5; as a system 79–80, 88–90; terminology 317; types of 4–5, 74–5; and war 78, 86–8; weakness 394*n*27; *see also* automatic balance of power; dyadic balance of power; manual balance of power



- balance of threat theory: and alliance behaviour 502; and balance of power 99*n*3, 345, 490*n*2; as degenerative problemshift 481, 482, 485–7, 501–3; described 7, 501–2; and foreign policy 497–8; unsatisfactory nature 434
- balancer 76, 80
- balancing: against a unipolar leader 406–7; coalition against China 451, 467; definition 74; and elite cohesion 269–70; and elite consensus 267–8; external 117, 269; internal 117, 269, 406–7, 412*n*5, 412*n*6; underbalancing 11, 265–70; versus bandwagoning 485–7; versus buck-passing 192–3; *see also* alliances; bandwagoning; buck-passing; soft balancing
- Baldwin, David 311, 313–19
- Balkan Wars 374, 425
- bandwagoning: and balancing 101, 121, 145–8, 193, 485–7, 496, 497; Britain and US 443; in defensive structural realism 145–8; defined 145, 490*n*1; during Cold War 398, 403*n*11; Italy and Nazi Germany 496; in neorealism 121; in offensive structural realism 193; and unipolarity 386
- Barnett, Michael 354
- Berger, Peter 345
- Berger, Thomas 353, 357
- Berlin plus missions 44, 447*n*2
- bipolarity: alliances 131–2; and balancing 412*n*5; Cold War 393*n*15; and dynamic differentials theory 235–9, 240*n*11; and Eurasia 387; and intervention 365; and likelihood of war 9, 18–19, 260; and neorealism 234–9; and stability 234–9; versus multipolarity 110–11, 393*n*15; *see also* Cold War
- Bismarck, Otto von 121–2, 138, 146, 147, 265, 386
- Blair, Tony 434, 443
- Britain: and balancing 265; bandwagoning and US 443; disarmament 67; and ESDP 434; and Falklands War 337; Fashoda crisis 305–6, 308*n*28; and German expansionism 116, 145–6, 147; and German reunification 180; hegemony of 42–3, 77, 184; and India 224*n*1; Napoleonic Wars 398; not a hegemon 184; offshore balancer 9, 21*n*10, 95, 429; prime ministers 105; and Russia 82; Trent affair 302–4; and US 217*n*30, 302–5, 393*n*17; Venezuela crisis 304–5; World War alliances 398; and World War I 142, 489; and World War II 356, 489, 502; *see also* appeasement
- buck-passing: and balance of power 87; by US 424; definition 199; as degenerative problemshift 485, 487–9; of distant hegemon 203*n*15; and offense-defense balance 249; versus balancing 192–3; World War II 259–63, 266, 488; *see also* chain-ganging
- Bull, Hedley 88–9, 362, 363, 365, 371, 373
- Burke, Edmund 90
- Buzan, Barry 375*n*10
- capabilities *see* distribution of capabilities; military capabilities
- Carr, E.H. 152, 279, 317, 327, 469, 475, 476, 505, 507, 520; *The Twenty Years' Crisis* 3, 33, 35–46, 277
- Castlereagh, Lord 146
- chain-ganging: definition 259, 488; as degenerative problemshift 487–9; multipolarity and 488; and offense-defense balance 249; World War I 259–63; *see also* buck-passing
- Chamberlain, Neville 55
- Charles I, King of England 265
- cheating 312, 326, 328*n*7, 332, 334–6, 340*n*32, 340*n*33, 373
- chemical weapons 356
- China 450–80; accommodation of peaceful rise 451, 468–70, 474, 478; balancing coalition against 451, 467; balancing US power 388, 389, 397, 401, 413*n*13; challenge to US hegemony 16, 18–19; in Cold War 19, 374; economic growth 477; and India 473; and Japan 466, 473; Mearsheimer's 'unpeaceful' rise 451, 464, 466–7, 468, 470–2, 477–8; military capability 17–18; and North Korea 410; poor prospects for regional hegemony 473; rise of 17–19, 464, 468; and Russia 418, 473; threat to US in Asia 466–7; threat to Western Powers 72*n*19; trading importance 477; and UN 420*n*7; and US 373, 374, 426, 473–4, 476–8; US economic interdependence 469–70, 477
- Christensen, Thomas 19, 244, 249, 259–64, 481, 484, 487–9, 498
- Christopher, Warren 330
- Churchill, Winston 55, 116, 398, 475
- Cipolla, Carlo 221–2
- classical realism 33–73, 255*r*; and domestic politics 476; explained 3–4, 33, 253; and human nature 33–4, 53, 59, 63; and power transition 212; and the rise of China 451, 468–9, 474–8; and the security dilemma 34, 60–1; versus English School 361–5; versus liberalism 13, 33; versus neorealism 102, 124–8, 188, 253–7, 313, 486, 498
- Claude, Inis L. 74, 317
- Clinton, Bill 292, 330, 426
- Cold War: alliance patterns in 181, 502; balancing absent during 266; bandwagoning 398, 403*n*11; bipolarity 393*n*15; and diplomacy 475; distribution of capabilities 522; economic power 182; ending of 12, 15, 163, 180, 353–4, 356–7, 397; fluctuations in

- cooperation 373; long peace 234; military intervention 365; origins of 132; regional alliances 89–90; resistance to wars 132; and security dilemma 163, 374; Soviet Union a regional hegemon 184; stability and 234; underbalancing 266; unipolarity after 387–90, 397; US regional hegemony 398; US-China relations 19
- collective security 43–5, 70, 338*n*13, 347, 444
- commercial liberalism 313
- competition: and anarchy 431; and balance of power 78, 116, 119; between great powers 386–7; causes of 34, 47, 185*n*3; and constructivism 343, 346–7; in Eurasia 199, 398; in Europe 16, 96, 147, 314, 422, 427; and neorealism 121–2; for power 63, 68, 70–1, 126; power-security 194; in production 495; for scarce resources 508, 518; versus cooperation 135, 157–66, 246
- concerts 78, 91*n*11, 347
- conflict *see* war
- constructivism: and anarchy 342–3; and cooperation 347; explained 14–15, 342–3; identity and interest formation 344–9; realist critique of 342–3, 353–7; and self-help 345–7; social theory 517*n*38; study of 287; versus liberalism 290; versus realism 481–2, 508
- continental powers 9
- contingent realism 157–8, 157–9, 162–4, 188; *see also* defensive structural realism
- cooperation: and anarchy 157, 320, 325; barriers to 312, 326, 327, 328*n*7, 332; cheating concerns 312, 326, 328*n*7, 332, 373; Cold War 373; and constructivism 347; economic 333, 335, 336, 337; EU-NATO 433; and institutionalism 14, 311–12, 316, 325–7, 333–7; international 321; and liberalism 287–90; peacetime 138, 157; and realism 331–21100, 331–2; and relative gains 14, 114–15, 331–2, 373; and self-help 135, 158–9; versus competition 135, 157–66, 246; *see also* alliances
- Copeland, Dale C. 11, 169, 206, 234–42, 366–7, 370–7, 509
- Crowe, Eyre 147
- Cuban Missile Crisis 234, 235
- culturalism 353–7
- Czechoslovakia 261, 373
- de Pradt, Abbé 78
- defense procurement 430, 433
- defensive structural realism **134–76**; and bandwagoning 145–8; and China 18; critiques of 482, 483–90, 505, 509, 512, 518; explained 6–8, 134, 245; and the offense-defense balance 137–44, 167–73; progressiveness of 245–50; and the security dilemma 7–8, 246–7, 373; versus liberalism 277; versus neoclassical realism 243–4, 248–50; versus neorealism 6–7, 134, 245–8; versus offensive structural realism 156*n*19, 177, 186–92
- degenerative research programs 20, 254, 481, 483–90, 500–3, 509, 512–13
- demanding test 502; *see also* hard case
- democracy, definition 399–400
- democratic peace theory **292–310**, 376*n*23; contradicted by history 399; explained 278; and foreign policy 277; and institutions 292–7; and liberalism 13, 277, 278, 292–8; near-miss case studies 302–8; realist critiques 13, 278, 292, 296–8, 301–8; and US foreign policy 277, 292
- dependent variable 235, 287–8, 308*n*1, 344, 371–2; *see also* independent variable
- Desch, Michael 343, 353–7
- deterrence 262, 264*n*16
- DiCicco, Jonathan 205, 211–17
- differential growth *see* rise and fall realism
- diplomacy 382, 408, 414, 417–19, 440, 475
- distribution of capabilities: Cold War 522; liberal view 284; material resources 508–9, 522; in offensive structural realism 183, 186*n*14, 201, 203*n*6; in rise and fall realism 227, 228–9; and structure 5, 101–2, 105, 110–12, 124, 345; and unipolarity 389–91; versus intentions 315–16; and war 394*n*20; *see also* military capabilities
- distribution of knowledge 349*n*7
- domestic politics: and arms races 165*n*6; and classical realism 476; and hierarchy 101, 104–6, 213; and legitimate use of force 113–14; and liberalism 277–84, 288; and military intervention 272–4; and military power 353; and national power 214; and neorealism 6; and power transition 212–14, 217*n*29; and preference formation 277–84, 290; and preventive war 230; to forestall decline 221–2; and underbalancing 266–70; and world survival 115–16
- domestic-level (unit-level) variables 202*n*4; in defensive structural realism 7–8, 249–50; in liberalism 12, 278, 283, 289–90; in neoclassical realism 11, 13, 19, 243–4, 247, 248–50, 251*n*8, 266–70; neorealism's non-use of 102–4, 110, 125, 127, 129–31, 191
- Downs, George 170
- Doyle, Michael 280, 288
- Dueck, Colin 244, 272–4
- dyadic balance of power 4, 7, 75, 93–100
- dynamic differentials theory 10–11, 235–9
- economic cooperation 333, 335, 336, 337
- economic hegemony, maritime powers 94–5
- economic power 237–9

- economic theory 106–7, 124–5  
 Egypt, Fashoda crisis 305–6, 308*n*28  
 electronic media 461  
 elites 267–70, 295–6  
 English School: and anarchy 343, 362–3, 367, 372–3; critique of realism 366–7; explained 343, 361–5; and international justice 364–5, 369*n*20; and international law 363–4, 368*n*14; and international society 363–4, 370–2, 374; and military intervention 365–6; and norms 367–8, 370; realist critique of 14–15, 342–3, 366–7, 370–4; versus classical realism 361–5; and world society 364  
 environment 333, 339*n*25  
 ESDP *see* European Union Security and Defense Policy (EDSP)  
 ethnic cleansing 459  
 ethnic conflict 215*n*7; and ethnic islands 458–9; and group identity 456–8; and humanitarian intervention 461–2; prevention of 461–2; preventive war 456, 460–1; realist concepts 453; and security dilemma 451, 456, 461; and state formation 460  
 Eurasia 145, 199, 387, 388, 389, 398, 455  
 Eurocentric bias, balance of power theory 94, 99*n*9  
 Europe: equilibrium of power 74–5, 82–5; institutions and Eastern Europe 330, 337*n*3; opinion poll on values 400  
 European Defence Agency (EDA) 430, 433  
 European troika 418  
 European Union Security and Defense Policy (EDSP): balancing US power 16, 395*n*31, 417, 422–3, 433–6; British attitude 443; civilian crisis management 447; defense procurement 430, 433; Helsinki Headline Goal (HHG) 445; institutions 432, 433, 437*n*10; member states' attitudes 434–5, 439*n*33; military force 418, 425, 432–3, 436*n*7, 437*n*11, 445; and NATO 433; NATO Berlin plus missions 444, 447*n*2; not intended to balance US power 423, 440–7; peacekeeping 430, 433; strategy document 430, 444; US attitude 434, 436, 438*n*25–8  
 European Union/Community: balancing US power 388–9, 395*n*30, 401, 422; collective defense 444; competition 16, 96, 147, 314, 422, 427; cooperation in 16, 96, 147, 314, 422; and Falklands War 337; and Iran 417; multipolarity possible 427; space programme 432–3, 438*n*18  
 expansionism; Germany 145–6, 147, 148, 262; great powers 194; land powers and 75; motive for intervention 374; and the offense-defense balance 137, 139–41, 175*n*34; overexpansion 249; and rise and fall realism 218, 222, 224*n*1; self-defeating 89; US 465; *see also* hegemonic war theory  
 external balancing *see* balancing  
 Eyre, Dana 354  
 Falklands War 337  
 falsification 217*n*31, 370, 372, 415, 485, 494–8, 498  
 Fashoda crisis 305–6, 308*n*28  
 Finnemore, Martha 353, 355  
 flux doctrine 84–5  
 Foote, Nelson 345  
 foreign policy: and balance of threat theory 497–8; and democratic peace theory 277; and domestic policy 482; goals 66–9; and liberalism 277–8; and morality 34; Morgenthau on 54–7; motives 55; rationality 3, 212, 297; *Realpolitik* 116–17; theories of 120, 202*n*4; *see also* buck-passing; chain-ganging; United States, foreign policy  
 France: Alsace-Lorraine 191; and balancing 265; and ESDP 434, 443; Fashoda crisis 305–6, 308*n*28; and Germany 180, 427; hegemonic ambitions 77; imperialism 84; and international morality 42; and Iraq War 409; Napoleonic Wars 88, 398; and NATO 443; naval power 96; Ruhr Franco-German crisis 306–7; and Russia 265; and UN 420*n*7; and World War I 261, 262, 294; and World War II 502  
 French Revolution 84, 221  
 Friedberg, Aaron 470  
 functionalist international theory 325  
 Gaddis, John Lewis 234  
 Gentz, Friedrich von 82, 83  
 geography 139, 193, 387, 458–9; *see also* stopping power of water  
 Germany: alliances against 398; anti-Americanism 410; appeasement 43–4, 475; balancing 265; balancing US power 388, 389, 397; and ESDP 434; European dominance 16, 180; expansionism 145–6, 147, 148, 262; and France 180, 427; hegemony 16, 265, 308*n*8; hegemony bid failure 472; hostility to internationalism 44; and international morality 42; military potential 426–7; Munich accords 475; naval power 96; nuclear weapons 163–4, 427; pacifistic culture 357; potential European hegemony 426–8; Ruhr Franco-German crisis 306–7; and Russia 427; and US military bases 416; and World War I 142, 144, 232*n*6, 264*n*16, 294, 298; and World War II 43–5, 332, 356, 466  
 Gholz, Eugene 428  
 Gilpin, Robert 206, 218–25, 254, 279–80, 327, 469, 476, 507, 509, 520

- Glaser, Charles 17, 135, 157–66, 169, 244, 245–52, 367, 450–1, 452–3
- Gowa, Joanne 509
- great powers 308*n*8, 393*n*15; aggression 186*n*6, 186*n*12; balancing among 93–8, 99*n*3, 363, 387–91; calculated aggressors 183–4; challengers to US hegemony 384; competition between 386–7; definition 159; expansionism 194; and offensive structural realism 178–85; possible future European 427; and rise and fall realism 10–11; separation of interests and reduced likelihood of war 132; strategies to arrest decline 221–2; underbalancing 265–6; *see also* states
- Greece, NATO membership 357
- Greek Empire 221, 222, 224, 234
- Grey, Lord 145–6
- Grieco, Joseph M. 314, 315, 316, 325–9, 335, 337, 508, 510
- Gulf War (1990–91) 356, 429, 502
- Gulick, Edward Vose 74–5, 81–5, 88
- Haas, Ernst B. 74, 76–80, 117
- Habsburg monarchy 94, 234
- hard case 354–5, 357
- harmony of interests 42–4
- Hegel, G.W.F. 40
- hegemonic stability theory 385–6
- hegemonic war theory 10, 206, 222–4, 393*n*17
- hegemony 186*n*13; and balancing 148; balancing of 77–8, 79–80, 93–100; of Britain 42–3, 77, 184; definition 184, 198; Germany 16, 265, 308*n*8, 426–8, 472; global versus regional 8–9, 177–8, 184–5, 198–202, 465; and international order 385–91; Japan 185; in offensive structural realism 177–85; regional bids likely failure 471–2; and stopping power of water 8, 178, 193, 199–200, 201–2, 474; strategies for achievement 203*n*34; survival prospects after attempting 472–4; wars against hegemony 86–8; *see also* China; expansionism; great powers; United States hegemony
- Helsinki Headline Goal (HHG) 445
- Herman, Robert 353–4, 356–7
- Herz, John H. 7, 34, 60–1, 182–3, 190
- hierarchy: and domestic society 101, 104–6, 213; performance levels 329*n*15; of state interests 355; and state power 49; versus anarchy 110, 112, 114, 186*n*11, 212–13, 507
- Hirschman, Albert 476
- Hitler, Adolf 43, 44, 88
- Hobbes, Thomas 126
- Höijer, Olof 78
- Holsti, K.J. 266
- Howorth, Jolyon 423, 440–7
- human nature 33–4, 53, 59, 63, 126
- human rights 365
- humanitarian intervention 355, 366, 373–4, 461–2
- Hume, David 119
- Hungary, post-World War I 68
- Hurd, Douglas 337*n*3
- Hurrell, Andrew 363–4
- idealism 60–1, 62, 64–5
- identity 344–8, 344–9, 354, 456–8
- independent variable 235, 241*n*19, 288–90, 308*n*1, 371; in English School 366, 371–2; in institutionalism 330, 332; in liberalism 288–90, 293, 296; in neoclassical realism 254–5; in neorealism 254–5; *see also* dependent variable
- India: and Bangladesh 374; and Britain 224*n*1; and China 473; growing power 401; military power 355, 359*n*22
- industrialization 205, 207–10
- institutionalism: absolute versus relative gains 311, 314–15, 325–7; and anarchy 313–14, 320, 322; case studies 315, 336–7; and cheating 312, 326, 328*n*7, 334–6, 340*n*32, 340*n*33; and cooperation 14, 311–12, 316, 325–7, 333–7; core assumptions 320; explained 311; historical record 336–7; independent variable 330, 332; information-sharing 322–3; and intentions 315–16, 322–3; and military capabilities 316; and prisoners' dilemma 314, 322, 334, 341*n*44; realist critiques 14, 312, 325–7, 330–7; relative-gains concerns 335–6; rules and norms 331, 338*n*13; versus liberalism 283, 519; versus neorealism 311, 313–17, 320–3
- institutions: defined 14, 322, 331, 346; in Europe 330; liberalism and 281–2, 295–6; and peace promotion 330–1; *see also* international organizations
- integration 114–15
- intentions: and alliance choices 147–8; and capabilities 315–16, 463*n*3; of China 19, 464; and constructivism 348; and defensive realism 247, 248–9; definition 174*n*9; EU states and EDSP 434–5, 441–2; and foreign policy 55; institutionalism and 315–16, 322–3; of military interventions 373–4; and revisionism 190–1; and signaling 161–2, 167–70, 173*f*, 348, 374; and soft power 412*n*7; uncertainty of 179–80, 190, 372–3, 464; of the US 397, 411, 415; versus capabilities 315–16; *see also* absolute gains; relative gains
- interdependence: China-US 469–70, 477; liberalism and 282–3, 283–4; neorealism and 114–15
- interest groups 295, 300*n*32, 512

- interests: and identities 345–6; as power 54–7  
 internal balancing 117, 269, 406–7, 412<sup>n</sup>5, 412<sup>n</sup>6  
 International Energy Agency (IEA) 336–7  
 international institutions *see* international organizations  
 international justice 364–5  
 international law 363–4, 368<sup>n</sup>14  
 international organizations: defined 339<sup>n</sup>14; extensive and expanding nature 106, 321; and US 405<sup>n</sup>31, 415–16, 418  
 international political change 218–20  
 International Political Economy (IPE), study of 12  
 international relations 328<sup>n</sup>7; English School views 364–5, 367–8, 370–1; liberal views of 279–80; norms 338<sup>n</sup>13, 367–8; and realism 505–6; study of 12, 33, 62, 101, 188, 287, 521  
 international society 363–4, 370–2, 374  
 international (systemic) variables 103, 111–12, 125, 129, 267, 283  
 international-political systems 6, 107–12, 114–15, 124; *see also* bipolarity; unipolarity  
 internationalism 44–5, 311, 312, 323  
 intervention: humanitarian 355, 366, 373–4, 461–2; *see also* military intervention  
 Iran, nuclear technology 411, 417  
 Iran-Iraq War 356, 457  
 Iraq: chemical weapons use 356; oil industry 411; sanctions 417; and UN 420<sup>n</sup>7  
 Iraq War (2003) 367, 399, 406, 409, 410–11, 414  
 Italy: and ESDP 434; World War II 44, 496  
  
 Japan: balancing US power 388, 389, 397; and China 466, 473; pacifistic culture 357; potential economic growth 395<sup>n</sup>33; prime ministers 105; regional hegemony 185; and US 425, 426; World War II 232<sup>n</sup>7, 466  
 Jervis, Robert 134, 136–44, 171, 259–60; *System Effects* 75, 86–90  
 Joffe, Joseph 415  
 Johnston, Iain 353, 354  
 Jones, Seth 441, 444  
 justice 364–5  
  
 Kant, Immanuel 50, 181, 293, 299<sup>n</sup>9–10  
 Kaplan, Morton 88  
 Katzenstein, Peter 353, 357  
 Kautilya 146, 149<sup>n</sup>9  
 Kegley, Charles 497  
 Kennan, George 33, 475, 476  
 Kennedy, Paul 509  
 Keohane, Robert 152, 154<sup>n</sup>9, 155<sup>n</sup>12, 280, 283, 288, 289, 311, 313, 314, 316, 317, 320–4, 333, 335, 336–7, 494, 509, 519  
 Kier, Elizabeth 353  
 Kim, Woosang 11  
  
 Kirshner, Jonathan 451, 468–78  
 Kissinger, Henry 253, 520  
 Krasner, Stephen D. 316, 317, 337, 509  
 Kuhn, Thomas 484  
  
 Lakatos, Imre 205, 213, 311, 320, 321, 323, 481, 485, 490, 493–6, 500, 519  
 Lake, David 509  
 land powers *see* military powers  
 Layne, Christopher 16, 178, 197–204, 278, 294, 301–10, 381–2, 396–405  
 leadership long cycle theory 10  
 League of Nations 37, 44  
 Leckie, Francis Gould 78  
 Legro, Jeffrey 20, 287, 353, 355–6, 482, 505–13, 518–22  
 Lemke, Douglas 10  
 levels of analysis *see* domestic-level (unit-level) variables; systemic-level (international) analysis  
 Levy, Jack S. 75, 93–9, 205, 211–17, 226–33  
 liberal institutionalism *see* institutionalism  
 liberalism **275–310**; assumptions of 280–3; and cooperation 287–90; critique 33, 269–80, 287–90, 519–20; critique of realism 244, 481–2, 505–13; definitions 287–8; and democratic peace theory 13, 277, 278, 292–8; and domestic politics 277–84; explained 519; ideologies 293–5; and interdependence 282–3, 283–4; and peace 12, 277; and preference formation 277–84, 290, 482; terminology 317; versus classical realism 13, 33; versus defensive structural realism 277; versus institutionalism 283; versus neoclassical realism 277, 511; versus neorealism 277, 283–4  
 Libya, alliance against 147  
 Lieber, Keir 382, 414–21  
 Lipson, Charles 314, 315, 333  
 Little, Richard 343, 361–9, 375<sup>n</sup>10  
 Lobell, Steven E. 244, 253–8  
 long peace 234  
 Luttwak, Edward 222  
  
 Maastricht Treaty 436<sup>n</sup>8  
 Machiavelli, Niccolò 39, 62, 63, 117  
 manual balance of power 4–5, 74, 81–5, 88  
 maritime powers 8, 75, 93–9  
 Martin, Lisa 311, 320–4  
 Marx, Karl 40, 41  
 Marxism 284<sup>n</sup>11  
 Mastanduno, Michael 315, 337  
 Matthew, Richard 280, 288  
 Mearsheimer, John 16, 99<sup>n</sup>6, 152, 177–8, 234, 330–41, 399, 422, 424–9, 508–9; on China 451, 464–7, 468, 470–4; *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* 8–9, 179–87, 188–202  
 Menon, Anand 423, 440–7



- metatheory 2, 13  
 Methodology of Scientific Research Programs (MSRP) 211–12, 213  
 Metternich, Prince 81–2  
*metus hostilis* (fear of the enemies) 254  
 military capabilities: armed neutral states 457; and balance of power 78–9, 306; chemical weapons 356; China 17–18; cooperation versus competition 157–66; definition 164*n*4; and economic might 336; European Union 442, 445; Fashoda crisis 306, 308; Germany 426–7; and group identity 457–8; imitation of 122; India 355, 359*n*22; in institutionalism 316; offensive 179, 196*n*14; and power 235–9; and preventive war 229–30, 232*n*15; and reassurance 167–76; and relative power 431; Ruhr crisis 307–8; weapons technology 140, 353, 354; *see also* European Union Security and Defense Policy (EDSP); nuclear weapons  
 military expenditure 385, 445  
 military intervention: by the US 197, 199, 244, 272–4; Cold War and post-Cold War compared 365–6; destabilizing influence 374; domestic constraints 272–4; and English School 365–6; uncertainty of intentions 373–4; *see also* humanitarian intervention  
 military posture 140–4, 167–8, 303  
 military powers: and balance of power theory 75; domestic considerations 353; and maritime powers 94–9; soft power challenges to US 409–11; territorial hegemony 94–5  
 Milner, Helen 314  
 minimal realism 509–12  
 Monroe Doctrine 304, 465  
 Montgomery, Evan Braden 135, 167–76  
 morality 34, 41–2, 50–2, 57–8, 316  
 Moravcsik, Andrew 13, 20, 277, 279–86, 287, 288, 289–90, 482, 505–13, 518–22  
 Morgenthau, Hans J. 64, 79, 117, 119, 126, 129, 152, 155*n*10, 187*n*19, 188–9, 253, 279, 285*n*13, 300*n*37, 315, 317, 362–4, 469, 475, 476, 489, 500, 505, 507, 511, 520; *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* 3, 5, 34, 53–9, 101, 484; *Scientific Man versus. Power Politics* 33–4, 47–52; "Six Principles of Political Realism" 53–9, 125; *see also animus dominandi*  
 motives *see* intentions  
 multilateralism 338*n*9  
 multipolarity: and alliances 102; balancing behavior 259, 497; and buck-passing 192–3; future European 427; of great powers 184; and likelihood of war 9, 131–2; and relative gains 91*n*8; structural uncertainty 261; versus bipolarity 110–11, 393*n*15; versus unipolarity 382, 403*n*2  
 Mussolini, Benito 44  
 Napoleon 77  
 Napoleonic Wars 88, 398  
 NATO: and Afghanistan 415; Berlin plus missions 444, 447*n*2; continuing role 430; and ESDP 433, 434–6, 443–6; and France 443; mutual interest alliance 357; Norwegian membership 89–90; realist view 332; satellite communications 437*n*15; and Serbia 374, 425  
 neoclassical realism **243–74**, 255*t*; and balancing 259–70; and China 19; conception of the state 254, 256, 265–70; critiques of 481–2, 486–9, 505–13, 518–19; as degenerative research program 481, 483–90, 509, 513; explained 11, 243–4, 253; and the international system 256–7; and the state 254, 256, 265–70; and state preferences 511–12; transmission-belt approach 11, 243–4; and underbalancing 11, 265–70; and US military interventions 197, 199, 244, 272–4; versus defensive structural realism 243–4, 248–50; versus liberalism 277; versus neorealism 254  
 neoliberal institutionalism *see* institutionalism  
 neorealism **101–33**, 255*t*; absolute versus relative gains 314–15; and anarchy 127; and bandwagoning 121; and bipolarity 234–9; and competition 121–2; core assumptions 320; explained 101, 253–4; and interdependence 114–15; and neoclassical realism 254; and origins of war 129–33; and power 126–7; terminology 317; versus classical realism 102, 124–8, 188, 253–7, 313, 486, 498; versus defensive structural realism 6–7, 134, 245–8; versus liberalism 277, 283–4  
 Non-Aligned Movement 418  
 non-proliferation 417, 419, 462  
 non-state actors 12, 17, 288, 450, 452  
 norms 338*n*13, 367–8  
 North, Douglass 322  
 North Korea: nuclear program 410, 417; and South Korea 417  
 Norway, NATO membership 89–90  
 nuclear war 234  
 nuclear weapons: as deterrent 458, 463*n*8; and disarmament 115; Germany 163–4, 427; non-proliferation 417, 419; and the offense-defense balance 140, 142–4, 163–4; proliferation 163–4; US deployment in Europe 418; *see also* non-proliferation  
 Nye, Joseph H. 316, 494  
 offense-defense balance: and alliance 481; and arms control 160–2; and arms races 137, 142–3; in defensive structural realism 137–44, 167–73; in ethnic conflict 456–8; and geography 139, 193, 458–9; misperceptions 249, 262–3; and nuclear weapons 140, 142–4, 163–4; and reassurance



- 170–3; relative advantage of offense 458–60; scenarios 141–4; and security dilemma 134, 136–8, 159–61, 190–1, 196*n*14, 246–7, 372–3; and technology 139–40, 458; World Wars 262–3
- offensive structural realism 177–204; and anarchy 179; and bandwagoning 193; and China 17–18, 451; and distribution of capabilities 183, 186*n*14, 201, 203*n*6; explained 8–9, 177; and hegemony 177–85; and power 177, 180–2; and security dilemma 8, 178, 182–3, 190–1, 373; versus defensive structural realism 156*n*19, 177, 186–92; versus liberalism 277; and war 9
- offshore balancing: Britain 9, 21*n*10, 95, 429; US 95, 185, 197–8, 199, 398, 401–2, 429
- oil industry: OPEC 418, 429; pricing in euros 411, 416
- Okawara, Noburo 353, 357
- Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries 418, 429
- Organski, A.F.K. 10, 118, 205, 207–15
- Ottoman Empire 87
- Owen, John M. 278, 292–300
- Pakistan, nuclear program 417
- Pape, Robert 382, 406–13, 415, 416, 417
- paradigmatism 2, 15, 20*n*3
- paradigms 154*n*9, 279, 287, 388, 483–91, 493–6, 500–3, 505–13, 518–22
- peace: and balance of power theory 78, 83, 386; international 43; and international institutions 330–1; and liberalism 12, 277; *Pax Britannica* 209–10; and power transition 217*n*30; UN peacekeeping 459–60; and unipolarity 384, 385–7; and US overseas presence 428–9; *see also* appeasement; democratic peace theory
- Persian Gulf War 356, 429, 502
- Philippines, and US military bases 416, 418
- pluralism 374
- Poland, World War II 332
- political realism 53–9, 125
- political science 36–8
- Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (Morgenthau) 3, 5, 34, 53–9, 101, 484
- Posen, Barry 16, 422–3, 430–6, 443, 451, 455–62, 509
- Possony, Stefan T. 64
- Powell, Robert 315, 316, 509
- power: accumulation of 64; aggregate power 145–6; in classical realism 469, 474–5; definition 71*n*13; economic versus potential 237–9; indifference to 69; interests defined as 54–7, 58; lust for 33–4, 47–50; Mearsheimer versus Waltz 189–90; and neorealism 126–7; in offensive structural realism 177, 180–2; potential power 207; and potential threat 145–6; proximate power 146; quest for 63, 65–6; relational concept 165*n*8; relative power 181–3, 431, 455; and risk of war 151–2; versus security 121; *see also* balance of power theory; distribution of capabilities
- power transition theory 10–11, 205–6, 212–15, 217*n*29, 393*n*17
- preference formation 277–84, 290, 482, 510–12, 514*n*9, 520–1
- Press, Daryl 428
- preventive war 10, 206, 226–30, 237, 456, 460–1
- Price, Richard 353, 356
- prisoners' dilemma 122*n*1, 314, 322, 334, 341*n*44
- problemshifts 485–9
- Prussia 121–2, 265
- public opinion 35, 295–6, 302, 303, 400
- Rasler, Karen 5
- Rathbun, Brian 277–8, 287–91
- rational actor assumptions 3, 154*n*9, 158, 180, 212, 235, 297, 453, 503*n*1, 508, 510
- realism 285*n*13; capacity for change 20; challengers 12–15, 287; contemporary relevance 452–3; and cooperation 331–2; core premises 509; degenerative research program 20, 254, 481, 483–90, 500–3, 509, 512–13; disputed origins 3; foundations 39–41; and idealism 60–1; influential tradition 501, 503*n*4; and institutions 330, 332; and political science 37–8; revival 450; terminology 317; theories 249–50; value of 151–2, 249–50; variants 152–3, 188, 500–1; versus constructivism 481–2
- Realpolitik* 116–17, 302, 339, 483
- regimes 338*n*9; *see also* institutions
- regional disputes *see* ethnic conflict
- regional powers 9
- regional trading blocs 408
- relative gains: competition for 508; and cooperation 14, 114–15, 331–2, 373; and institutionalism 335–6; and multipolarity 91*n*8; security concerns 335–6; versus absolute gains 91*n*8, 311, 314–15, 326–7, 331–2, 515*n*13
- relative power 181–3, 431, 455
- republican liberalism 313
- revisionism 7–8, 178, 190, 191–2
- Ripsman, Norrin M. 244, 253–8
- rise and fall realism 205–42; and anarchy 211–12; and China 18–19; and distribution of capabilities 227, 228–9; and expansionism 218, 222, 224*n*1; explained 9–11, 205; and war 10–11

- risk 230, 232*n*16  
 Risse-Kappen, Thomas 354, 357  
 Robespierre 55  
 Roche, David 170  
 Roman Empire 222, 234  
 Rose, Gideon 511  
 Rosen, Stephen 353, 355  
 Rousseau, Jean Jacques 5, 351*n*24  
 Russia: balancing US power 388, 389, 397, 411, 417; and Britain 82; and China 418, 473; and France 265; and Germany 427; and Iran 411, 417; military potential 426–7; potential hegemon 427–8; and Ukraine 462; and UN 420*n*7; World War I 261, 262; *see also* Cold War; Soviet Union  
 Russo-Turkish war 89  
  
 satellite communications 447*n*15  
 Saudi Arabia, territorial denial 409  
 Schelling, Thomas 150–1  
 Schroeder, Paul 88, 321, 484, 495  
 Schumann, Frederick L. 64, 79  
 Schweller, Randall 11, 192, 244, 265–71, 415, 482, 486–7, 496, 518–21  
*Scientific Man versus. Power Politics* (Morgenthau) 33–4, 47–52  
 sea powers 8, 75, 93–9  
 security: definition 72*n*21; *see also* collective security; European Union Security and Defense Policy (EDSP); NATO  
 security dilemma: and anarchy 130–1; and arms races 183–4; and China's rise 18; and classical realism 34, 60–1; in Cold War 163, 374; and constructivism 349; and defensive structural realism 7–8, 246–7, 373; and ethnic conflict 451, 456, 461; explained 8, 34, 190, 455–6; and idealism 60–1; offense-defense variables 134, 136–8, 159–61, 190–1, 196*n*14, 246–7, 372–3; and offensive structural realism 8, 178, 182–3, 190–1, 373; and state vulnerability 260  
 security studies, cultural theories 353–7  
 security systems 346–7  
 self-help 323*n*1; and anarchy 101, 107, 116, 260, 342–3, 345–9; and balance of power 483; and constructivism 345–9; and cooperation 135, 158–9, 346–7; defined 114, 117–18, 436*n*3; and self-interest 181, 399  
 self-restraint 87, 402  
 selfishness 33–4, 47–9  
 Serbia 374, 425, 459  
 signaling 161–2, 167–70, 173*f*, 348, 374  
 Snidal, Duncan 314, 315  
 Snyder, Glenn H. 178, 188–96  
 Snyder, Jack 244, 249, 259–64, 481, 487–9, 498  
 social cohesion 269  
 social constructivism *see* constructivism  
 sociological liberalism 313  
  
 soft balancing: against US 16, 381, 409–11, 413*n*13; antecedents 412*n*11; by second-tier states 407; defined 418, 441; economic measures 411, 416, 420*n*9; ESDP not an example 423, 440–7; mechanisms 16, 382, 408, 415–17; no evidence of 414–19; regional trading blocs 408; territorial denial 408, 409, 411, 412*n*12, 416  
 soft power 412*n*7  
 solidarism 373–4  
 South Korea: and North Korea 410, 417; and US 410, 420*n*12  
 Soviet Union: and Afghanistan 224*n*1; Cold War alliances 132; and Cold War ending 356–7; demise 12, 425, 431; foreign policy 122; naval power 96; regional hegemon 184; and Spanish Civil War 89; and Turkey 72*n*19; World Wars 262, 332, 398; *see also* Cold War; Russia  
 space programme 432–3, 437*n*15, 438*n*18  
 Spain, naval power 96  
 Spanish-American War 294, 296  
 Spykman, Nicholas John 64, 77–8, 469  
 stag hunt 347, 351*n*24  
 state behavior: aggression 186*n*6, 186*n*12; cheating 312, 326, 328*n*7, 332, 334–6, 340*n*32, 340*n*33, 373; and English School 372; fear driven by structure 180–1; and flawed human nature 2; and morality 50–2; morality, and 34, 41–2, 50–2, 57–8, 316; power maximization 177–84; and risk 230, 232*n*16; rules 331, 338*n*13; use of force 116; variations 127; zero-sum mentality 181, 224, 474, 508; *see also* intentions; self-help  
 states: capability differences 109; collected desire for power 49–50; definition 256; expectations of 66; formation 460; fragmented states 11; geography of 139, 193, 387; goals 315; government/ regime vulnerability 268–9; independence of 81–3, 84–5; interdependence and integration 114–15; longevity of 109; multiple identities 345; neoclassical realism conceptions 254, 256, 265–70; non-security interests 191, 194; preference formation 277–84, 290, 482, 510–12, 514*n*9, 520–1; rational actors 3, 154*n*9, 158, 180, 235, 453, 503*n*1, 508, 510; rising powers 451, 468–9, 474–9; self-abnegation 66, 67; self-extension 66, 67–8, 69–70; small states 376*n*11; survival motive 8, 66, 68–9, 108, 323*n*, 327, 464; threats to territorial integrity 94; types 64; *see also* great powers  
 Stein, Arthur 313, 314–15, 316  
 Stinchcombe, Arthur 355  
 stopping power of water 8, 178, 193, 199–200, 201–2, 474  
 Strausz-Hupé, Robert 64

- structure: defined 103–4; and distribution of capabilities 5, 101–2, 105, 110–12; of domestic politics 104–6; and identity 344–8; interactions at unit level 129–30; international 107–12, 114–15, 124, 127; ordering principles 105–6; and state power 177, 180–1
- Suchman, Mark 354
- System Effects* (Jervis) 75, 86–90
- systemic-level (international) analysis 103, 111–12, 125, 129, 267, 283
- systems theory 102, 103–4, 110–12, 130; level of analysis 11, 13; *see also* structure
- Taiwan 429, 466, 467
- Taliaferro, Jeffrey W. 244, 253–8
- Tannenwald, Nina 353, 356
- territorial denial, for US bases 408, 409, 410, 411, 412*n*12, 416–17
- terrorism 17, 453
- Thatcher, Margaret 338*n*3
- The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (Mearsheimer) 8–9, 177–204, 188–202
- The Twenty Years' Crisis* (Carr) 3, 35–46, 277
- theory: critical test 498; evaluation 493–9; falsification 217*n*31, 370, 372; hard cases 355, 357; misapprehension of 129
- Theory of International Politics* (Waltz) 5–6, 12, 101, 102, 103–12, 320–1, 521
- theoryshifts 485–9
- Thompson, William R. 5, 75, 93–9, 229
- threat: and alliance choices 147–8, 261, 497; elite consensus 267–8; perception 348; and security dilemma 34; and state power 145–6; *see also* balance of threat theory; defensive structural realism; military posture
- Thucydides 56–7, 222, 224, 476
- Tirpitz, Alfred von 122
- trades unions 43
- transmission-belt approach 11, 243–4
- Trent affair (1861) 302–5
- Turkey: NATO membership 357; and Soviet Union 72*n*19; territorial denial for US bases 409, 411, 416
- Ukraine: nuclear weapons 163–4, 462; and Russia 462
- unilateral defense 160, 165*n*12; *see also* arms control
- unipolarity: and alliances 386, 408–9; balancing against 406–7; challengers to US 382, 384; and distribution of capabilities 389–91; durability 15–16, 16, 367, 384, 387–9, 400; instability 383, 384, 497; Mearsheimer's denial of 198, 203*n*6; Pax Americana 390–1; and peace 384, 385–7; regional competitors unlikely 388–9; and structural realism 431; US power preponderance 383–4; versus multipolarity 382, 403*n*2; *see also* hegemony; United States hegemony
- United Nations: agencies 364; and Iraq 409, 415, 420*n*7; peacekeeping 459–60; supervisory powers 411
- United States: American Civil War 265, 294, 297, 298, 300*n*22; anti-Americanism 410, 418; and Britain 217*n*30, 302–5; and China 373, 374, 426, 466–7; Chinese economic interdependence 469–70, 477; Cold War 132; and democratic peace 277, 292; economy 428–9; foreign policy 16, 62, 273, 295, 296, 357, 381–2, 424; improved foreign relations 414; military expenditure 385; military intervention 197, 199, 244, 272–4; national security strategy 406, 409–11; and North Korea 410, 411; oil revenues 411, 416; opinion poll on values 400; as potential unreliable ally 425–6; public opinion and war 296; Spanish-American War 294, 296; trade 416, 418–19; Trent affair 302–4; Venezuela crisis 304–5; war on terror 416; *see also* Cold War
- United States hegemony: balancers against 16, 395*n*31, 400–1; British view 308*n*8; buck-passing 424; and China 16, 18–19, 473–4; in Cold War 398; continuing troop presence overseas 428–9; counterbalancers 397; domestic political costs 391; durability 15–16, 367, 381; and economic measures 411, 416, 420*n*9; and ESDP 423, 433–6, 438*nn*25–8, 440–7; exceptionalism 397–8, 472; and geography 178, 199–200, 387; global nature 178, 197–202; history 465–6; and international stability 497; military bases overseas 199, 408, 409, 411, 412*n*12, 416–17, 420*n*12, 424–5, 466–7; Monroe Doctrine 304, 465; and multilateralism 398–9; need for self-restraint 402; non-threatening versus benevolent nature 396–8, 399–400, 403*n*8, 404*n*18; off-shore balancer 185, 197–8, 199, 398, 401–2, 404*n*27, 404*n*31; offshore balancing 95, 185, 197–8, 199, 398, 401–2, 429; Pentagon strategy 383; regional competitors unlikely 388–9; regional nature 184–5, 186*n*14, 465–6; soft balancing measures against 382, 409–11, 415–17, 415–19; and South America 202; US power preponderance 383–4; waning of 400–1; and World Wars 425, 429, 465–6, 502; *see also* unipolarity
- utopianism 36–8, 39, 41, 45, 70
- Van Evera, Steven 134–5, 150–56, 171, 226, 249
- Vasquez, John 20, 287, 321, 481, 482, 483–90, 493–9, 500–3

- Venezuela crisis (1895-6) 304-5  
Vietnam War 89, 224*n*1, 296, 457
- Walt, Stephen 7, 134, 145-9, 345, 399, 418, 441, 481, 482, 484, 485-7, 497, 500-3  
Waltz, Kenneth N. 113-34, 280, 313, 323*n*2, 326-7, 347, 381, 385, 386, 481, 483-7, 493-9, 500, 505, 507, 508-9, 511;  
chain-ganging versus buck-passing 259-62;  
neorealism 5-6, 152, 212, 243, 245-6, 253, 254, 256; *Theory of International Politics* 12, 101, 102, 103-12, 320-1, 521; versus  
Mearsheimer 178, 188-90, 191-2  
war: balance of power and 78, 86-8; causes 131-3, 150-6, 227, 249, 394*n*20; and classical realism 3; and distribution of capabilities 394*n*20; effect on economy of neutral countries 428-9; intensity of state preference 284; major war definition 234, 239*n*2; near-miss case studies 302-8; and offensive structural realism 9; power transition theory 214-15; prevention of 37, 150; preventive war 10, 206, 226-30, 237, 456, 460-1; and public opinion 35, 295-6; and rise and fall realism 10-11; sideline sitters 236, 240*n*13, 302  
Watson, Adam 371, 373  
weapons technology 140, 353, 354; *see also* nuclear weapons
- Weber, Max 256  
Wendt, Alexander 342-3, 344-52  
Wheeler, Nicholas 374  
Wight, Martin 117  
Wilson, Peter 289  
Wilson, Woodrow 62, 64-5  
Wohlforth, William 16, 381, 383-91, 406, 482, 521-2  
Wolfers, Arnold 8, 34, 62-71, 253, 520  
world society 364; *see also* English school  
World Trade Organization 416  
World War I: causes 35, 262; chain-ganging 259-63; chemical weapons 356; coalition alliance 145, 148*n*3; Germany and 96, 142, 144, 232*n*6, 298; naval power 96; offense-defense balance 137, 142, 144; origins 88; US entry 429; US troops 425  
World War II: alliance patterns in 145, 148*n*3, 181, 398, 502; appeasement 43-4, 45, 55, 268, 475, 489; buck-passing 259-60; causes 11, 262; chemical weapons 356; Germany's failure 96, 472; military strategies 356; origins 44-5, 332, 373; Pearl Harbor 232*n*7; US entry 429; *see also* Hitler, Adolf  
World Wars, alliance patterns 145, 148*n*3, 181, 259-63, 398, 489, 502
- Zacher, Mark 280, 288  
zero-sum mentality 181, 224, 474, 508